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Busy yet passive: (non-)decision making in school governing bodies

School governing bodies in England have considerable powers and duties and their formal role positions them as decision-makers. This paper draws on qualitative research in the governing bodies of four maintained schools. Using deliberative democracy as a sensitising concept, it considers some processes by which decisions are made (or not made) in governing bodies. Without claiming that governors never make decisions, it explores constraints and limitations on their ability to do so. Governors exhibit a paradoxical combination of busy-ness and passivity. On the one hand, governing bodies are constituted and structured around activity and technically decisions were made. On the other hand, it was rare that decisions could be attributed to active choices by governors. Rather, their more passive agreement to actions and positions was presented as almost unavoidable 'common sense', either due to the national policy context or to the headteacher's presentation of the available options.

Keywords: school governing bodies; deliberative democracy; parents; meetings.

Introduction

School governing bodies (GBs) in England have considerable powers and duties in the running of schools. They potentially provide a space for the involvement of parents, staff and members of the local community in making important decisions about schools. Therefore, the way in which such decisions are made is very significant. This paper explores this drawing on concepts of deliberative democracy which help highlight some constraints on their decision-making.

Firstly, the powers and duties of GBs in England are introduced. The next section describes the approach to the research and the use of deliberative democracy as a sensitising concept. I then describe issues which are available for discussion by governors and the composition of the four governing bodies studied. The main body of

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the paper considers a series of norms which lead to constraints on decision-making. I begin by considering the silences and non-engagement produced by the ways of talking encouraged by the formality of GBs. In this, I explore contextual factors which may impact engagement and confidence. I then explore constructions of consensus as a common good. The next sections consider the framing of decisions and the limited spaces for decisions. In conclusion, I suggest that decision-making was constrained and limited by all the above and that the performance of GB meetings produced legitimacy for 'technical' decisions involving a small number of governors.

There were some differences between the four GBs in their formality and in how open the schools were. However, this particular paper focuses on the similarities between them rather than the differences.

School governing bodies in England

The plethora of types of school in England means there are many kinds of school GBs. This research took place in the GBs of local authority (LA) maintained schools which had one GB per school. At the time of the research, their powers and duties included: setting the budget, appointing the headteacher and setting the school's broad direction (DCSF 2010, DfE 2012). GBs are made up of 7 to 20 (or even 30) people, including an elected chair, and are supported by a clerk. They meet as a full GB about 6 times a year and have various committees on aspects such as curriculum and finance which meet between full GB meetings. The basic composition of the GBs of maintained schools at the time of the research was: the headteacher; staff governors elected by staff; parent governors elected by parents; LA governors nominated by the LA; community governors nominated by the GB. This is described as a 'stakeholder' (DfE 2012) model

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and is premised on the idea that different stakeholders bring different knowledge to the GB (Young, 2015).

Approach to research

This paper reports on qualitative research with the GBs of four maintained schools in one London borough in 2011 and 2012. Two schools, Avon and Severn, were primary and two, Mersey and Tyne, were secondary schools. The research was broadly ethnographic with a total of 23 meeting observations and 25 interviews. Agendas and minutes were also examined. For each school, observations were conducted in about three full GB meetings and three other micro settings, mostly committee meetings.

I am a governor myself and my experiences shaped the development of this research. As a middle-class white woman without children, I wondered what right I had to a say in the running of a school, especially one so different to mine had been, with over half of the pupils receiving Free School Meals (a proxy indicator for deprivation in England) and more than eight in ten from minority ethnic groups. I found that issues of substance were rarely discussed and formalities took up most of the meetings. I was interested in the group dynamics and the different subject positions available to governors. Having worked in organisations which attempted to question pedagogies and the aims of schools, I was struck by the lack of challenge to dominant educational discourses.

During the meeting observations, I wrote almost continuously. I observed both the form the discussion took and any privileging of particular voices and discourses. In the first meeting in each school, the observation was fairly open, exploring who talked

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and on what subject, what authority claims speakers made and the assertiveness of their statements. The observations of subsequent meetings in each school were more focused on themes that emerged from the first meeting. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the headteacher, chair of governors and about four other governors in each school. The interviews were based around a skeleton interview schedule with a range of types of questions. The observations informed the interview questions and prompts. Similarly, responses to interviews shaped later observations. The focus was on formal spaces. Nonetheless, I was aware, largely through the interviews, of the existence of informal interactions which would have been difficult to access directly.

The analysis was broadly inductive but guided by research questions, the literature and my experience based expectations (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 165). I used 'grounded theory methods as flexible, heuristic strategies rather than as formulaic procedures' (Charmaz 2003, 251).

Deliberative democracy as a sensitising concept

Theories of deliberative democracy are helpful for exploring the decision-making of a group of people where the processes are potentially richer than merely voting. In this study, they were used as sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1969 cited in Charmaz 2006, 16-17), not as ideals against which to judge the empirical world. Deliberative democracy can be described in opposition to an aggregative or voting model of democracy. In the aggregative model, individuals' preferences are seen as fixed in advance of any political process so the purpose of the process is to aggregate them. Conversely, according to a deliberative democracy model, individuals' preferences may be altered by the political process. People learn more about the

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situation and come to understand how others are affected by a particular stance.

Engaging in dialogue and reflecting on their own and others' reasons can lead to the transformation of their preferences. I am particularly drawing on the work of John Dryzek (2002) and Iris Marion Young (2002 [2000]) who emphasise the recognition of difference and challenging of existing power relationships. For example, in opposition to theorists such as Habermas who emphasise consensus, Young emphasises drawing out and valuing difference and says, 'Too strong a commitment to consensus as a common good can incline some or all to advocate removing difficult issues from discussion for the sake of agreement and preservation of the common good' (Young 2002 [2000], 44). Importantly, Young's emphasis on difference does not mean self-interested consumers or stakeholders. She suggests, instead, an understanding of citizens as concerned with 'collective problems' (Young 2002 [2000], 43), including public goods, rather than with a singular common good.

In introducing deliberative democracy, it is important to note my assumption that 'Emotions are always present, whether or not they are recognised or welcome, and can either facilitate or hinder the deliberation' (van Stokkom 2005, 404). This assumption runs counter to both effectiveness literature on GBs and some writing about deliberative democracy (e.g. Elster in Hoggett and Thompson 2002, 4, and Habermas in Young 2002 [2000], 63) which present deliberation as entirely 'rational' and without affect or emotion. Young (2002 [2000]) rightly recognises that imposing 'rationality' can exclude some people. However, in her attempts to counter this, I suggest she is in danger of overvaluing the emotional dimensions without recognising the potential dangers of modes such as rhetoric and that overt displays of emotion can also exclude

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those not comfortable with such speech. Hoggett and Thompson find a balance through the notion of 'passionate rationality' (2012, 122-3) which does not set rationality in opposition to affect but recognises that they cannot be understood separately from each other. This approach informed the research.

The use of deliberative democracy as a sensitising concept also has value in drawing attention to process rather than merely to outputs or fixed states. With Mouffe, I would suggest that politics implies ongoing contestation and that 'In a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism' (Mouffe 1996, 255).

Issues available for decision

There is not space to describe all the issues available for discussion and decision in the study schools. However, a few preliminary indications are made here. During the study period, none of the GBs were involved in what are their largest potential tasks; namely appointing a new headteacher or changing their school status (to become an academy, for example). Decisions described as 'big' by more than one interviewee included: signing off the budget; agreeing to building work; involvement in pupil disciplinaries and exclusions; staff restructuring; and the introduction of school uniform. Aside from the examples of school uniform at Avon (where the head did not have strong feelings) and of overturning student exclusions at Mersey, the examples which interviewees gave of big decisions were decisions where the governors had agreed with the headteacher's position. This role, of apparently 'rubberstamping' the headteacher's decisions is discussed in the section on 'The framing of decisions'. Headteacher appointment and

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school status decisions will not be discussed as none occurred during the research period. However, it could be suggested that the lack of other decision-making experience ill-prepares governors for such significant decisions.

The composition of the school governing bodies studied

In the LA studied, LA governors are not appointed on a party political basis as they are in some boroughs. Furthermore, although some governors in other schools in the borough were councillors, there were no serving councillors in the four study schools. There is, therefore, no formal party link for the governors in this study.

There is a lack of national statistics about the profile of school governors. However, the research which does exist suggests they are disproportionately white, middle-class and not young (Dean et al. 2007, Ellis 2003, Ranson et al. 2005). This was certainly the case in the four study schools. About half of the pupils at Mersey and a majority in the other three schools were from minority ethnic backgrounds. The pupils in all four schools were much more likely than average to receive Free School Meals. In contrast, the governing bodies were made up of twice as many white governors as minority ethnic governors. Support staff governors and some parent governors were working class but almost all the other governors were middle class. Reay *et al* suggest that, for middle-class parents, becoming a school governor is 'a way of subjecting the school to surveillance as well as a means of supporting it' (Reay et al. 2008, 247-8).

The GBs of the study schools tended to comprise core and peripheral governors. The literature suggests a division of GBs into a core and periphery is common and that the core tends to be even less representative of the demographics of the local population

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(Ranson et al. 2005, 361, James et al. 2010, 50, Radnor, Ball, and Vincent 1997, 215).

The division of the GB into core and peripheral governors was starker in the secondary schools but occurred in all four. Core members attended committee meetings and spoke much more than the peripheral governors. Committees tended to reproduce the core/periphery division rather than acting as a place where peripheral governors could develop views to take to the full GB. In all the schools, there were some governors who hardly spoke at all in meetings. These peripheral governors cannot be seen as contributors to decisions. The core governors tended to be middle-class and largely white. The most peripheral governors included middle and working-class governors and white and minority ethnic governors but were disproportionately Bengali and parent governors. The research was qualitative so statistical claims cannot be made about the demographic ratios in the core and periphery but the disproportionality struck me and some interviewees. For example, Leonard commented on the existence of the core and periphery and on their ethnicity:

I think there is definitely two tiers of governing body membership as far as I can see on [Tyne]. And there are those who are, more likely to be consulted informally and those who are less likely to be. And to some extent it reflects the way in which people take part in the more optional activities like going to the subcommittee meetings but, I mean you know I am conscious that most of us are white with the exception of [Chaman, the middle-class Bengali chair] and [Chaman] has been around for a long, long time (Leonard, Tyne Secondary)

Government policy is moving towards 'smaller governing bodies with appointments primarily focused on skills' (DfE, 2010, p. 71, para 6.30). In other words, policy suggests that only the core is needed. The valuing of a small group of people

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with 'skills' implies that there is no need for a range of perspectives and that representation over a range of dimensions such as class, gender and ethnicity is not significant (Young, 2016). The division of GBs into core and peripheral governors seemed to be accepted by many governors and by Ofsted's thematic report on GBs (2011) as 'natural'.

In the study schools, the existence of a core and a periphery meant that just a core made any decisions in the name of the whole GB. This is a significant limitation on democratic decision making which intersects with the other norms and limitations discussed in the rest of this paper.

Ways of talking and social awkwardness

Back and forth deliberation was not common in the meetings I observed. This section explores how particular ways of talking can constrain engagement in decision-making. As noted above, ways of talking are influenced by and influence emotions and affect. This is important for GBs as social awkwardness and not wanting to challenge norms affect engagement. The ways of talking in all the GBs observed demonstrated considerable formality. Formality can be seen as comprising: discussion being addressed through the chair; closely following set procedures and a written agenda; avoiding friendly chat; using impersonal, business-oriented and apparently unemotive language; and the production of formal minutes. The research reinforced that of James *et al* who comment, 'The discourse at governing body meetings is often "white middle class", which can be a significant impediment to participation by minority ethnic groups' (2010, 66). A number of interviewees were surprised at how formal the GB meetings were in comparison to their workplaces. Some governors were much more

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comfortable with this than others. At Severn Primary, both the head and chair told me everyone would be comfortable to speak. However, Patty, a working class parent governor, said she had not previously attended formal meetings and when she first came to the GB it was 'quite daunting actually'. Her discomfort had not gone away and was reflected in her disjointed sentence structure as well as the content of the following comment:

I don't feel, because there is not, there is not the space in, you quite often you quite often. I will sit there and I will think "oh actually, maybe I will say this and" but I don't know, I just don't feel comfortable, you know. I kind of question myself. "Is this the right thing to say?" Or "Is this the right time to say it?" (Patty, Parent governor, Severn Primary)

Silence and absences such as the absence of engagement by some governors, which I observed, are complex and can be interpreted in many ways. However, there were hints of ways in which the silent governors might be more engaged. The effects of greeting, relationship building and context specific confidence building are discussed below and all have implications for wider engagement in decision-making. Young (2002 [2000]) discusses the importance of 'greeting' or 'public acknowledgement' preceding deliberation for establishing recognition, equality and trust:

At that most basic level, "greeting" refers to those moments in everyday communication where people acknowledge one another in their particularity. Thus it includes literal greetings, such as "Hello", "How are you?" and addressing people by name. In the category of greeting I also include moments of leave-taking, "Good-bye", "See you later", as well as the forms of speech that often lubricates discussion with mild form of flattery, stroking egos, deference, and politeness. Greeting includes handshakes, hugs, the offering of food and drink, making small talk before getting down to real business (Young 2002 [2000], 57-8)

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This draws attention to some important aspects of the GBs which have implications for the engagement of governors in making decisions and which are explored here. Governors did not all know each other's names, a situation which could be easily addressed. Not knowing each other well is potentially an obstacle to some governors feeling comfortable to talk, particularly about values or principles as noted in research conducted 20 years ago:

The evanescent character of governing bodies means that many governors do not know their fellow governors anything like as well as they would if they worked together on a daily basis. So the conditions under which all or most members of governing bodies might feel able to divulge their values are rarely present (Deem, Brehony, and Heath 1995, 164)

It is often easier to talk when people know each other. Community and LA governors without a direct connection to the school might be expected to feel most strongly that they did not know other governors, for example:

I suppose that I don't ever speak to any or get a chance to speak to any of the other governors (Christopher, Community governor, Mersey Secondary)

However, in all the study schools, not knowing each other was common for most governors. There were limited other spaces in which they met, apart from primary parent governors meeting in the playground. I was surprised to find a number of interviewees did not know the names of all the other governors. The observations and interviews suggested some of Young's criteria for 'greeting' (2002 [2000]) were met but many were missing, including the most basic one of people knowing each other's names.

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There were a number of governors who told me that they felt confident to challenge in meetings but who I hardly heard speak in my observations. At Mersey Secondary, Tara and Sally both told me they would raise something '*if necessary*'. Christopher, based on his experience of working with groups, suggested that the reason certain governors did not speak is that they were not confident. I take Young's italicised words below to refer to confidence:

Deliberative theorists tend to assume that bracketing political and economic power is sufficient to make speakers equal. This assumption fails to notice that the social power that can prevent people from being equal speakers derives not only from economic dependence of political domination but also from an *internalised sense of the right one has to speak or not to speak*, and the devaluation of some people's style of speech and the elevation of others (*my emphasis*, Young 1996, 122)

The relationship between 'social power' and confidence is very significant for GBs where inequalities, including of class and ethnicity are pervasive. Such power cannot be 'bracketed'. Furthermore, context and relationships, rather than just individual attributes, are significant in the apparent confidence of governors' engagement. Leonard was white, middle-class and a confident and active governor at Tyne Secondary. In describing how he had been a disengaged primary school governor before this, he talked about his perception of not being made welcome when he joined, which led to his not speaking much in that GB. This context dependent confidence was also borne out by the difference in the two governor experiences of Patty, a white working-class mother. She talked about the importance of amicability and social relations for her confidence. As mentioned above, she did not feel very confident at

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Severn Primary which she found formal. However, she felt confident at the smaller special school where she was also a parent governor and where she knew everyone well.

In addition to context, the topic being discussed impacts on governors' confidence. Governors who appeared not to be confident were very confident when talking about a particular topic about which they felt knowledgeable and 'allowed' to speak about, for example, Piyal, a Bengali mother, talked confidently about school uniform at Avon Primary, a 'welfare' rather than an academic issue on which parental views were deemed legitimate. Governors' apparent lack of confidence is sometimes a symptom of a lack of clarity about their role, especially for the elected parent and staff governors who felt constrained in the topics about which they could talk (Young, 2014).

Since confidence is partly context specific, it could be increased by changes in the context with a greater emphasis on greeting in Young's (2002 [2000]) sense. Such social interaction validating each governor as an individual might engage more governors and transform the ways of talking normalised in the meetings. Chairing in a more facilitative manner might make meetings more inclusive, deliberative and creative. These changes, in turn, might present new possibilities for decision-making processes.

'Consensus as a common good'

This section explores how conceptions of a singular common good and the valuing of consensus can militate against the expression of difference which can limit possibilities for deliberative decision-making. It considers the affective desire for consensus and a common good. My findings were similar to those of Dean *et al* who found that

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governors tried to 'proceed through consensus in pursuit of some notion of the common interest of the school' (2007, 53-54).

Young's concern that 'Too strong a commitment to *consensus as a common good* can incline some or all to advocate removing difficult issues from discussion for the sake of agreement and preservation of the common good' (Young 2002 [2000], 44) was particularly salient in the GBs. Exploring difference is important for GBs. Firstly, they are made up of individuals who may well have differing educational values and perspectives to articulate. Secondly, deliberation has an educative role so, if there are no opportunities for the discussion of diverse views, members are less likely to formulate views about issues and are more likely to assume that there is no alternative to the *status quo*. However, the expression of difference in meetings can be perceived to be against the 'common good', despite the fact that many decisions in schools inevitably favour certain pupils over others. Many governors told me they saw themselves as being there for the good of the children. For example, Larry said he was 'just making sure that the school is being run in the best interests of, you know, of the kids and their parents. Just, you know, overall best interests' (Larry Severn). When a headteacher presented a decision for agreement, going against it could be perceived as going against the common good where the children were concerned. Consensus and harmony were often strong ideals which operated against the socially awkward expression of difference. Furthermore, the conception of a singular common good is associated with the dominant policy discourse of valuing technical skills-carriers with managerial knowledge as 'impartial' and well-suited to implementing this apparently indisputable common good (Young, 2016). The conception of a singular common good and the constitution of

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education and governing as apolitical operates against the discussion of alternative conceptions of 'good' education to that of the national performative system.

The affective elements to consensus mean that how difference is expressed is important for how it is valued. GBs seem to reflect a wider social discomfort with disagreement which can often be understood as discord and experienced as unpleasant. The norms discussed throughout this paper mean that opportunities rarely arose for different views to become explicit. However, explicit expressions of difference were occasionally observed at Tyne (Young, 2014). When difference was expressed at Tyne, it tended to feel aggressive and personal. It felt uncomfortable and the headteacher was angry and distressed after the last full GB which I observed (my notes, Tyne Full GB, July 2012). In the other schools, difference was not really expressed and votes which would express difference were avoided if they might be socially awkward. This reflects a wider social discomfort with disagreement which can often be understood as discord and unpleasantness. A sense that this is how expressing difference happens and feels partly explains people's reservations. It would require a change in the social norms and understandings of GBs (and wider society) for difference to be valued, encouraged and expressed in positive terms. Deliberative options might reduce the aggressive ways in which difference was expressed.

In summary, there can be a sense that to challenge the consensus can be seen as a challenge to a singular common good and hence against, in this case, the good of the children. The lack of expression of difference can lead to the exclusion of the

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perspectives of subordinated members and a lack of exploration of alternatives to dominant discourses of education in any decision-making.

The framing of decisions

The framing of meetings, through the written agenda, the issues presented for decision and the focus of the minutes, suggests that governors are decision-makers. Yet this belies a lack of pro-active decision-making. Written agendas operated to constrain what could be discussed. Minutes suggested that 'technical' decisions were something more than that and that conflict did not occur, potentially precluding future decisions or expressions of difference.

Agenda

'Agenda' can be understood in two different but related ways: firstly, as the written agenda followed in each meeting and, secondly, as 'what it is possible to discuss'.

This sub-section considers the first, the concrete written agenda. The second meaning of 'what it is possible to discuss' is related to the first. Keeping items off the agenda of 'what it is possible to discuss' is a key way to influence decision-making (Bachrach and Baratz in Lukes 2005) and the written agenda is one way of constraining what is discussed.

GB meetings are closely structured around written agendas set in advance. There are lots of statutory items to be covered such as signing off policies. Additional items tend to be added by the clerk and headteacher rather than by other governors. The two clerks, Clara at Avon Primary and Mersey Secondary and Clark at Severn Primary and Tyne Secondary, explained how the agendas for the full GB meetings were generated.

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Both talked about the standard items which make up most of the agenda. In this sense, 'the cycle is already preordained' (Clara). A few items were added by the clerk as a result of discussions in the previous meeting, for example, building issues at Mersey Secondary. Most additional items came from the headteacher (or in the case of secondary school committees, the lead member of staff for that committee).

Non-staff governors did not tend to add items to the agenda. This can be understood as an important example of non-decision-making as it restricts the topics which are available for discussion (Lukes 2005). Both clerks wrote 'Items for next meeting' on agendas so governors could have suggested some but this was not a norm at any of the schools and I only saw one attempt to do this. Both Layla and Christopher were very confident professional people with considerable experience of similar meetings. When I asked them about adding items, both said that it was not a norm:

I mean anyone can put anything on the agenda but again it's it's part of, I guess it is part of the norms and behaviours of the governing body. If everybody is always putting different things on the agenda that they want to discuss, then everybody else would do it. But because nobody does on a regular basis, it makes it a lot more difficult I think for others (Layla, LA governor, Avon Primary)

Christopher's comment suggests a greater ambivalence about whether actively adding items would be possible. The italicised words indicate the lack of clarity about adding items and the passivity of governors in setting the agenda:

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I'm sure if you wanted to put something on the agenda you could. You know *if* I did *if* I felt strongly I would e-mail [Heidi, the headteacher] and [Clara] who's the clerk. But I *think* by and large it is a process that is a very standard agenda every time *as far as I can work out*. It is sort of. There *tends* to be some sort of presentation at the beginning and again that is *probably* [Heidi's] input ... It *seems a fairly passive process* to me. I *don't know* if one can actively ask for agenda items (Christopher, Community governor, Mersey Secondary)

Governors' lack of educational and contextual knowledge also constrained their ability to suggest potential items for future meeting agendas (Young, 2015).

A lot of full GB meeting time is devoted to agenda items with broad headings such as 'Headteacher's report'. The headteacher largely determines what is discussed under the headteacher's report. The schools tended to alternate written and oral headteacher's reports with the written one mostly being sent to governors in advance. Where an agenda item heading is broad and/or papers are not sent in advance, it is difficult for governors to prepare for the meeting by researching issues coming up.

The agendas were followed closely and were very significant in shaping the discussions at meetings. Following the agenda closely is one element of the 'formality' discussed above under 'Ways of talking and social awkwardness'. It limited the issues which governors, particularly those least experienced in such forums, could raise. As a parent governor, Patty felt there was no space in which she could speak:

I think, just as I say, if there was. If if, perhaps the the um agenda was looked at. Maybe every so often there could be, you know, if just they. If just times when they talked about general things. Or even if, maybe, once every couple of months

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they could have a section on the agenda for parent governors to feed back, you know? ... because when you look at the agenda, there isn't... So that we could then, we would know that every three months we have got that opportunity (Patty, Parent governor, Severn Primary)

In this, Patty suggests that both her position as a parent and the way in which the agenda shapes the meeting creates norms which severely limit opportunities to speak.

People did not tend to add items during the meeting. There were occasional issues raised under 'Any other business' (AOB) which tended to manifest as individual complaints. Some of these were accepted and discussed whereas others, particularly from parents at Tyne Secondary were not accepted as appropriate by the headteacher or chair and governors were directed to other channels. In the other schools, particularly the primary schools, the headteachers were more tolerant of what might be seen as individual complaints. The fact that such items arose under AOB indicates the ambiguities about what it is appropriate to bring to a GB. Governors' lack of clarity about their role was a recurring issue (Young, 2014).

Minutes and 'technically' making decisions

The minutes operate as 'a performance or fabrication' (Young, 2016, 171). In this, there is a greater emphasis on impressing Ofsted by 'doing the document' rather than actually 'doing the doing' (Ahmed 2007, 591). Minutes implied that decisions had been made.

In minutes by both Clara and Clerk, each item was followed by 'RECEIVED' or 'RESOLVED'. Items 'resolved' tended to include agreeing on previous minutes as a true record, ratifying policies and agreeing the budget. These capitalised 'RESOLVED' items evoke a sense of an objective and final resolution. The presentation of the minutes

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with this focus on 'RESOLVED' outcomes contributes to the constitution of GBs as decision-making bodies.

The minor conflict and dissent which I observed was not recorded in the minutes, except on one occasion at Tyne (where I observed conflict more than in the other GBs). In this case, the debate was specifically about how a previous discussion, on changing the length of the lunch break, had been minuted and governors requested specific wording to be included in the minutes. For governors reading previous minutes, the lack of conflict and debate recorded in them is potentially significant as it constitutes the GB as a forum where conflict and debate do not, and hence should not, occur.

There was variation between interviewees as to whether they thought it was the headteacher (and chair) or the whole GB that made decisions. However, where 'technically' they *were* making decisions, many governors in all the schools, referred to their role as often just to 'rubberstamp' the headteacher's proposals. They were busy (doing a lot of rubberstamping) but largely took a passive role in relation to actual decision-making. The headteachers came with a decision for ratification and there was little space to challenge this. As Christopher, a community governor at Mersey Secondary, said, governors 'technically' made decisions. Hence, governors largely ratified decisions made by the headteacher:

[Hazel, the headteacher] presents something for, you know, a proposal for agreement so um absolutely the governing body make, they reaffirm, agree to,

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disagree but they make the decision. But it is very much based and influenced by [Hazel] (Larry, LA governor, Severn Primary)

There were some minor threats of a rejection of the rubberstamping role.

Occasionally, governors seemed to sometimes draw attention to their legal powers through phrases such as '*If we approve this ...*'. Pam, a parent governor, did this in relation to the decision to put down AstroTurf (Mersey Premises Committee, July 2011) and Frederick, the chair, in relation to moving to the next stage of a building programme (Mersey Full GB, May 2011). Both were white middle class professionals. Such interventions were rare but more common in the secondary schools and in relation to budgetary decisions. Heidi was headteacher at Mersey Secondary and a community governor at Avon Primary where her intervention led to a different staff structure to that originally proposed by the headteacher, Hannah. Her position as an experienced local secondary headteacher made her a powerful primary governor.

Spaces for decisions

Spaces for discussions and decisions were limited. Firstly, a lot of time was taken up by information giving so there was a constant sense of being too short of time for discussion. Secondly, secondary school committees were often referred to as where decisions happened but this did not necessarily mean these decisions were discussed much. The suggestion that they had been discussed added legitimacy to decisions when they reached the full GB after being on a committee agenda.

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Information giving and time pressure

Although full GB meetings lasted up to three hours, there was a lot of information giving and a sense that there was not time for much discussion. As Larry said:

You know, it is very much headmistress and teachers sort of presenting to you
(Larry, LA governor, Severn Primary)

The majority of time in the meetings that I observed was taken up with the headteacher and other staff giving information to the rest of the governors. This is recognised in the minutes where 'RECEIVED' appears after most items which implies that the GB has done its job by passively receiving information. This might be seen as a performance of accountability (Young, 2015).

Receiving presentations by staff, usually about the curriculum, seemed to be unambiguously valued by interviewees. Often, however, presentations did not lead to as much discussion as governors might have liked. The busy-ness of the meeting was combined with the passivity of governors in the following example where Lucy felt constrained and unable to discuss the interesting presentations:

I feel a little bit like agendas are too busy to have proper discussion, you know, this week's meeting [Tyne Secondary Full GB, May 2012] was a really prime example of that. People were getting up and leaving from two hours into the meeting so there was a big pressure to stop discus, you know, right from the beginning, we were being chaired in a, you know, "you have got 5 min to do this, do this". The literacy people came and gave a fabulous, you know, presentation about really

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exciting work. Then we all just said “thank you” ... and they left. We weren't allowed, it's a not “allowed” but it was clearly, you know, that was number one of an agenda of 25 items and we had to get through it all so if you discuss it properly, it, there isn't time. So that is a massive challenge (Lucy, LA governor and parent, Tyne Secondary)

Despite all the time which was spent on information giving, there was a sense in all the schools that time was very limited so discussion should be kept to a minimum; in ‘hurtling through’ the agenda:

And there's no real discussion. There's a lot of information. A lot of process. A lot of sort of hurtling through and a sort of a round of applause if we get through it heh heh in nearer to an hour than two hours. Which I don't really see the point of (Christopher, Community governor, Mersey Secondary)

Chairs' comments on keeping to time were made in all the study schools. Severn Primary felt like the GB where it was easiest to speak, largely due to the friendly atmosphere and the unassuming manner of the chair, Pam. However, even there, the following comments suggested that saving time was a high priority. Like ‘hurtling through’ above, the use of ‘rattle through’ and ‘whistle stop’ are far removed from any conceptions of deliberative discussion:

Lee [chairing in Pam's absence] said at the beginning that he needed to leave at 7.25. It seems the meeting could have gone on for longer and that he moved things along faster than he might have done (my notes, Severn Full GB, March 2012)

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Hazel [headteacher] – so we finished at 10 to 7 [proud to finish in good time] (my notes, Severn committees, May 2012)

Pam [chair] – OK let's rattle through. Apologies? (My notes, Severn Full GB, May 2012)

Pam - since we are not quorate, let's do a whistle stop (my notes, Severn Full GB, June 2012)

The sense of time running out was widely felt and seemed to operate to minimise debate and the introduction of issues not on the agenda. 'AOB', the standard final item on agendas, was a space where new topics could be added but this was constrained by the social awkwardness of adding items when everyone was ready to go home. Pakeezah was a confident governor to the extent that she had been chair at Avon Primary for the year preceding the first meeting I observed. However, she said adding topics that she was interested in was hard as:

the only chance, you probably would have, is at AOB... but then sometimes right at the end, people get tired. And even though you wanted to ask, you wouldn't ask. So the situation has been like that. I've not asked, because it is like oh everyone is getting all restless and they want to go home because it is eight o'clock (Pakeezah, Parent governor, Avon Primary)

Governors are unlikely to add items either in advance or during meetings if they feel that meetings are already too long. The feeling that people would like to get home after a long day acts as a significant social constraint. The balance between ensuring

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everyone feels there is space for discussion and preventing meetings from continuing all night is difficult. However, it seemed to me, and to interviewees who raised it, that there was so much information giving that time for deliberative decision-making was marginalised.

Secondary school committees' role in (not) making decisions

The GBs all had committees but the number and type varied. The full GB formally delegated certain powers to committees. In policy (DCSF 2010) and practice, they are standing committees rather than working groups for deeper discussion of issues arising in full GB meetings. The committees took on a life of their own with numerous administrative tasks to complete.

This sub-section briefly mentions issues which apply specifically to secondary school committee meetings. The primary schools' committees were fairly similar in composition and mode to their full GB meetings so are not discussed here. In the secondary school committees, official membership was low and turnout was very low. However, if items had been raised in committees, they were presented to the full GB as having been fully discussed. For example, Laurence, an LA governor and Curriculum and Personnel Committee chair, told the full GB that his committee had gone through two strategic documents, the School Development Plan (SDP) and Self-Evaluation Form for Ofsted (SEF), (my notes, Mersey Full GB, July 2011). This implied that they had looked at both thoroughly whereas they had just looked at a one page summary of the SEF and not the SDP (my notes, Mersey Curriculum and Personnel Committee, June 2011). This added legitimacy to what might otherwise be seen as rubberstamping exercises (by a very small number of people). This extra layer provided to GBs by

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committees can be understood as a microcosm of the symbolic (Ball 1987, 237)

legitimacy given to school decision-making by the presence of GBs. The double layer of symbolic moments can operate as performances giving an appearance of engagement in decision-making through which the legitimacy of decisions seems to be increased.

Concluding thoughts

This paper has discussed how governors perceived themselves as decision-makers but tended not to actually make decisions, beyond ratification. Using deliberative democracy as a sensitising concept has helped to show how power operates to create norms which limit who can speak and what can be said. The concrete practices of governing bodies operate in combination with whiteness, middle class norms and narrow discourses of what education is for. These all tend to constrict possibilities for active governors to democratically shape schools. Important constraints and limitations on decision-making include: ways of talking; the framing of decisions; the limited spaces for decisions; and constructions of the common good and consensus. Some governors did not speak or engage in any decision-making and this was partly due to the ways of talking within the GBs. A lack of personal relationships and context specific confidence also constrained speech and hence engagement in potential decision-making. Some practices, such as 'greeting' (Young 2002 [2000]), supported engagement although they were limited. Conceptions of the common good and the valuing of consensus militated against discussion and the expression of difference which limited possibilities for decision-making. Written agendas operated to constrain what could be discussed. Minutes present decisions which have only been made in a 'technical' sense as decisions and suggest that conflict does not occur potentially precluding future decisions or expressions of difference. A lot of time was taken up by information giving

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so there was a constant sense of being too short of time for discussion. Secondary school committees were often referred to as where decisions happened even when they had hardly been discussed; the suggestion that they had been discussed added legitimacy to decisions ratified by the full GB. In summary, the GBs were all simultaneously busy and passive and the performance of their meetings produced legitimacy for 'technical' decisions involving a small number of governors.

The considerable powers and duties which school governing bodies have in the running of schools mean that these findings have significant implications. The norms described in this paper mean that their workings are not as inclusive, active, deliberative and creative as they could be. Governing bodies are, therefore, poorly positioned to question dominant discourses of education such as the current national performative system.

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