FORUM

From Partnership
to Community Governance

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ABSTRACT If learning is a journey between worlds, school governing bodies have a crucial role to play in mediating them. By establishing a public space for the voice of different communities to be expressed and deliberated governing bodies enable schools to understand and engage the cultural sources that motivate young people to learn. This article draws upon recent research which describes how leading authorities are creating a framework of governance to support the creation of such a learning community.

Governance Mediating Learning Between Worlds

Learning grows out of motivation which depends upon recognising and valuing the distinctive qualities of each and the cultural traditions they embody. If learning expresses a journey between worlds, the challenge for the school is to create a learning community that brings together local and cosmopolitan in its pedagogic practices (Hasan, 2005; Lingard et al, 2008; Moll, 2005; Wells, 2000). This configuration of the school and its communities, by interconnecting the symbolic orders of each, creates the conditions for relevance, motivation and learning. Excellent teachers have always sought, as a defining principle of their individual practice, to relate activities within their classroom to the interests of the child. But the argument of leading schools now proposes that this configuration is a strategic and systemic task for the school as a whole institution and for schools together in relation to the wider learning community they serve.

Understanding this interdependence of learning and living leads to a conclusion that it is the function of governance to constitute the structures of mutual recognition within and between the school and its communities (Ranson, 2004). The professional specialist will have a vital role to play in judging the appropriate learning materials that will forge the connection of

meaning between cultures. But the task of creating the learning community to include worlds of difference, cannot alone be the responsibility of the knowledgeable specialist. It is, principally, a function of governance to constitute the forms of life in the public sphere and, in so doing, constitute the springs of motivation and the conditions of learning. Realising achievement depends on governance as the condition for recognition and motivation.

The purpose of the governance of learning is thus twofold. The first is to constitute the public goods of educating all children and young people to develop their potential so as to contribute fully to the communities in which they will live and work. In so doing, governance constitutes what it is to be a citizen. Because an education is about the unfolding of a life, rather than the induction of a skill-set, decisions about the purpose and content of an education are likely to reflect differences of belief and become the subject of contestation and debate.

An essential and related purpose of the governance of schooling, therefore, is to constitute the spaces and processes that enable the relevant interests and voices to deliberate the purposes of learning and capability formation. This dialogue cannot be a technical task of calculation, but will need to be governed by the principles of public discussion – the giving and taking of reasons – that can resolve differences and secure public agreement. This process should include not only those directly involved in a school, such as parents and teachers, but take into account the interests of the wider community, because all will be affected by the public good of educating every child.

A New Community of Practice

Recent policy formation has sought to prescribe a new community of practice for the education service to support all the needs of all young people and their families. The near universal tradition of providing an education service has been to conceive the object of learning as the child in the classroom of a school detached from the community. Now the focus is on creating a more inclusive learning community embracing family and neighbourhood, with teachers, health and social workers collaborating to support all the learning needs of all children throughout their lives. A broader range of learning *outcomes* is created to help young people realise their potential and improve their chances of succeeding in life.

Policy initiatives have necessitated the re-configuring of school, children's centres and agencies into *collaborative 'localities and clusters'*. Because all the services and curricular opportunities required by these extended school policies cannot be provided by each institution alone, they will need to be offered in consortia arrangements. This is leading to fundamental changes in the governance of schools and localities (Ranson & Crouch, 2009). The policy agenda is clear, emphasising the family, responsibility for welfare of the whole child, supported by partnership building and collaborative working. A leading Local Authority Governor Co-ordinator commented:

> These policies are all about engagement, involving the community to
> help shape services to meet the community's needs; active
> community participation in shaping services, and taking schools
> beyond the narrow inward looking standards agenda.

What is being proposed here is the creation of a model of governance and accountability that reflects a very different conception of organizing education, from the tradition which locates learning within an institution to one which makes the wider community responsible for developing education. If there are to be targets, the Group would like to see them placed on an area, so that all schools take responsibility for all the children in a community. This would prevent the process of passing 'excluded' children from one school to another in the attempt to improve results at the expense of others. The Educational Improvement Partnerships have encouraged this, asking secondary and primary schools to collaborate to address underachievement at an early age, touching all the partners in an area, who will need to decide these issues together. This will be a challenge for the profession, but also a challenge for the governing bodies. It is difficult though to change the individualist mentality and culture that has developed over twenty years. To quote the Governor Co-ordinator again:

> We are living in a new world, and governing bodies need to engage
> with the new policy agenda that requires us to operate differently.
> Those who recognize this are the vanguard that will create the
> future. Governing bodies are at different levels of understanding and
> achievement. We need to raise the bar for those that are good, while
> lifting up the others.
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> The localities model is the future. Collaborations have been
> growing for different purposes to enable community engagement
> and cohesion. We need governing bodies to broaden their remit, to
> engage more broadly with the community, to engage with the
> underachieving. Examine what are the obstacles, and identify those
> in the community who can help remove the obstacles to learning.
> This develops the role of governing bodies as leaders and enablers of
> community development. There is also a growing recognition that
> the new partnership agenda requires a process of accountability to
> the community for public services.
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> Joint governor arrangements are needed. At one level this is
> straightforward, requiring agreements to be minuted, but the next
> level it is the need for joint committee arrangements. These joint
> committees in 5-10 years will become locality boards. Education
> Improvement Partnerships use collaborative arrangements to create
> Joint Committees, not just for 3 or 4 schools but for the whole of a
> town. When partners want to speak to schools they will speak to the
> Joint Committee. That will become the mechanism for collective
> decision-making. Money in the future will be devolved to these Joint
> Committees.

> People are ready for this. It is not being resisted by heads. But it must be owned by governing bodies themselves: it should not be imposed on them. (Local Authority Governor Co-ordinator)

The emerging model of governance will turn governing bodies into leaders of the community. Advocates for this model recognize that the challenge posed by their reforms is to grow the new model out of current best practice and to grow the capability of parents to contribute to this extended community form of governance. The model needs to develop flexibly to respond to emerging local needs and local groups and the Local Authority is the appropriate layer of governance to take the lead in creating the emerging system of community governance.

Towards Multi-level School and Community Governance

A robust and coherent framework of reform is needed to support and secure the governance of learning communities. This research (Ranson & Crouch, 2009) describes the ways local authorities have experimented with new forms of governance, that have resulted in some looking to move beyond experiment to establish a coherent system of school and community governance. The principles for such a framework of governance should, where possible, attempt to accommodate and reconcile the tensions that presently frustrate the practice of good governance. For example, can such a framework accommodate: multi-layered governance; executive and scrutiny functions; specialist and civic knowledge; difference and deliberation; professional and citizen membership.

The Level of the School and Neighbourhood Cluster

The cultural transformation of schooling, driven by policy, lies in expanding the object of learning from the child in an 'enclosed' school classroom to the wider learning community of the family and neighbourhood. All the schools and centres in a neighbourhood cluster take on responsibility for care and learning of all the young people and families in the community. The challenge is to engage and involve those families in the value of learning that can enhance their capabilities and life chances. Assuming this responsibility of care is not a substitute for pursuing the highest standards of attainment but a condition for realizing them.

Elaborating such a learning community cannot alone be the responsibility of professionals, imposed on clients as in the post war period, but can only be formed through cooperation with children, young people and families whose voices are crucial to shaping the purpose of expert knowledge. If the community, the teachers and centre workers are to collaborate in supporting the learning needs of local people, then appropriate forums will be required to allow a neighbourhood strategy and provision to be deliberated and planned.

Many local authorities have been working with schools, centres and communities to develop these cooperative practices at the level of the cluster.

The momentum for reform may be slowest at this level because of the reluctance of some schools to cede authority to a federated governing body. A twin track approach of slow and accelerated reform may be necessary. But the model to which practice should develop is that of partnership governance. When a cluster is ready to strengthen its collaborative practice they will constitute a federation board that integrates the governing bodies of local schools and centres. The board's membership will include representatives of each school as well as the primary care trust. The work of the board will be supported by a community Advisory Council of parents and community interests that will deliberate the learning needs of the community and to scrutinize the work of the board. Each school will form an executive sub committee of the cluster board.

The Level of Localities

If the community cluster is to be supported with all the extended learning activity envisaged in *Every Child Matters* and *the Children's Plan*, then this will require planning and coordination at the level of 'the locality', above the cluster and below the Authority. For many local authorities, the locality is a third or a quarter of the authority, perhaps 100,000 people. There are a number of arguments for this intermediary tier. First, the number and complexity of voluntary services and agencies offering services to schools and centres needs to be negotiated and managed efficiently, preventing duplication and avoiding market manipulation. The local knowledge and intensity of networking required suggests a point of negotiation and leverage below the local authority, yet above the school community. Second, if the emergent 14-19 tertiary sector is to develop as planned, it is clear that a locality tier is essential to coordinate the planning and networking of learning between secondary schools, colleges, and training providers. Third, if clusters are not to become ghettos of learning, then localities provide a space within which young people can move not only in search of specialized courses, but in order to extend their learning about different social and cultural traditions so that they learn to become capable members of a cosmopolitan civic society.

The appropriate tier for governing the diverse agencies and services to develop the practices of partnership and inter-agency coordination, planning and distribution is the locality. Here we propose a Partnership Board to be formed, that includes the variety of public, private and voluntary interests, and will focus on preparing the strategic plan for the locality. This Board might be quite large, in some local authorities perhaps 50-70 members. The Board would need to elect a smaller steering committee to organise the routine business of the Board.

The locality could be the tier of governance to include a trust dimension, trusts that could include private and voluntary interests but in which the public

service sector would be the predominant interest. The model could be the kind of trust developed in some health sectors which have created a partnership trust to embrace, as well as service providers, local people and service users. This form of trust is conceived as a democratic cooperative society that will have a say about the provision of services, how public money is spent, to elect representatives to the Board and to play a scrutiny role in relation to the board.

The Level of the Authority

What has become evident during the unfolding development of clusters and localities is that the support of the local authority is indispensable. Authorities meet a number of needs that can only be provided at that level, if the clusters and localities are to work together to meet the needs of a just, cosmopolitan society as a coherent whole.

Strategic planning and development will be needed to assess the diversity of needs and to ensure the distribution of resources that meets all those needs. If it is acknowledged that there is no neutral, technical education that can be detached from the perspectives of different lifeworlds, then politics is an inescapable reality of the public sphere. Indeed, as we discussed above, an essential role of governing the public sphere is to ensure that differences are voiced, deliberated, and mediated. The central function of a local authority is to govern the local debate about the purposes and content of education, through processes that ensure public reason so that the shape of local education as a whole is agreed and is believed to be fair and just. The role of the local authority is to build coalitions that create the climate for, and thus legitimate, change.

If the indispensable role of the local authority in the emerging layered system of school and community governance is to be acknowledged and reinforced its authority and powers need concomitantly to be clarified and strengthened. The local council as the democratic centre of local services, and children's services, needs to be restored to its principal role in leading the public sphere. It should be the lead voice and power in the Children's Trust, and in time local services such as health and police should be restored to local democratic planning and direction.

Concluding Comments

What can be learned from this discussion about the needs of school governance for the 21st century? First, that governance matters because: it strengthens the practices which secure institutional performance; it mediates the social and cultural conditions that engage young people in their learning; and it constitutes the practices of participation and deliberation which secure that mediation. Second, the participation of volunteer citizens matters because practical wisdom is as, or more, important than technical expertise or networks of social capital. Finally, the object of governance should include the community as well as the

individual institution. The purpose of governance is to develop the public goods of learning and citizenship, and to mediate differences so as to secure public agreement about those goods of educational opportunity. A public education cannot be left to chance and contingency, nor to the interested decisions of a corporate club or association. It is the responsibility of civil society as a whole. The conditions for this transformation lie in developing the capabilities of volunteer citizens; linking the ecclesia and the agora.

The dilemma facing the governance of schools, and implicit in the unfolding analysis, is the anxiety on the one hand that many volunteer citizens may lack the capabilities to contribute to the exacting tasks demanded of contemporary governance of schools. On the other hand, the argument has proposed that families and their communities must be major stakeholders in the arrangements of governance because their participation is essential if schools are to develop understanding of the social and cultural conditions of learning. A child cannot be educated independently of her community's webs of significance. The challenge for governance, as has been argued is therefore to mediate the lifeworlds of children and the public world into which they are journeying. Governance is not a technical task, it constitutes the conditions for effective learning.

How is this dilemma to be reconciled? There will be a need, a senior HMI reported, for a school 'to grow a governing body' if it is to fulfil the demands of constituting a learning community. Parents from disadvantaged communities are more likely to develop the confidence to become members of the governing body when they have been involved in the life of the school. When they are invited to become mentors for young people, use their local knowledge and cultural capital to support the school, in helping to organise festivals, concerts, plays and musicals and artistic events, parents will give expression to their varied capabilities. A school that creates forums for parents (in addition to those for children) at the level of the class, year group and school creates arenas that encourage and support the capabilities of voice, deliberation and collective judgement that are the defining characteristics required for capable participation as volunteer citizens in the governance of schools.

In this way governance is not a separate assembly detached from the life of the school. Rather, governance is integrally connected to and grows out of the life of the school as an expanded learning community. There is not a crisis of capability in the community. Most governing bodies, even in areas of disadvantage, are well governed. There is a rich pool of volunteer citizens who have the experience and capability to grow into community leaders of cluster and locality governance. Schools, by expanding parent involvement throughout, become the nurseries of capability for knowledgeable citizenship participation and leadership in civil society.

Note

This article draws upon Ranson (2004) and Ranson & Crouch (2009).

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