
My Thirty-four Years as a School Governor, with Reflections on Some Aspects of Curriculum Change

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ABSTRACT This reflection does not pretend to be a scientific survey of curriculum trends but is, as the title suggests, a personal reminiscence of governorship across different phases of education, with snippets about the curriculum that my memory recalls.

I have been privileged to be a governor of an infant school, junior school, secondary comprehensive school, sixth-form college, university and now a primary school. Up until the sixth form I followed as a parent governor our sons' school careers, but I fell in love with their secondary school where I am coming to the end of 28 years' service as a governor. I was appointed a local authority governor at the primary school in 2013. The secondary school is reconstituting to a smaller group, in line with recent Coalition Government changes in regulations. This moment marks a suitable time for me to retire.

Here I should comment on the new regulations, where the emphasis is on recruiting governors with certain skills, rather than in accordance with a stakeholder model of governance. Parent and local authority representation is much reduced and the governing boards will be more akin to a company board rather than one based in, and related to, the community. For those of us who believe in schools being part of the local community, as well as for the families and children who attend, this is a backward step. It reflects the Coalition Government's obsession with management at the expense of democratic accountability. It is a model more akin to free schools, trusts, academies and academy chains, where decisions are often taken as if the school were an incorporated company.

Chairing the governors of the first school (infant age plus year 3) was like jumping in at the deep end, especially as this was my first time as a governor. I

soon found out why no one else wanted the job, as a major part of my role was to be the interface between the head teacher and parents. Sadly, of the all the skills she possessed, the head was lacking in the skill of 'listening to and understanding parents'! I do not recall having detailed discussion about the curriculum in the early eighties, although I'm sure we must have done so. I did learn about raising achievement by raising expectation. We appointed a very capable deputy head who took over supervision of music. Within weeks she turned the feeble, often out of tune, squawks of our whole-school singing into a competent whole-school choir who were asked to perform in city events, to the amazement of parents.

Teachers were expected to know their children well, to monitor their progress, take action where children needed extra help and report on their progress to parents. Governors had a head teacher's report at each governor's meeting. We dealt with very little data about quality of teaching. Concerns I raised, as chairperson, with the area education officer were batted back as 'not my job'! That was the job of the local schools' inspector. However, they were not taking any of the action that clearly was needed to deal with a number of issues.

We did not have the Early Years Foundation Stage and its 17 early learning goals and 17 profiles to report on. We did not have Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs), of which more later. We did not have PANDAs (Performance and Assessment Data), which enabled governors to benchmark their school's performance against similar schools and the national average. We did not have Raise online (Reporting and Analysis for Improvement through school Self-Evaluation), which the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) provides for governors to have a detailed analysis, by pupil subgroups, of their school's performance against targets. We did not have Ofsted, or Ofsted Dashboard Data. Reading was taught by the method that the teacher chose and which best suited the child. Phonics was one of a wide range of methods for teaching reading, not a government-directed preferred method. Did teachers talk about vowel phonemes or vowel digraphs? I don't remember – maybe they did. We did not have the National Curriculum or the English Hour or the Maths Hour or Big Books. We did not have a RAP (Raising Attainment Plan). We did not have National Curriculum Expected Attainment Levels.

Tough Challenge

National Curriculum tests or SATs, were first introduced in 1991 for year 2, then in 1995 for year 6 and 1998 for year 9. They are a key part of the data that governors use to monitor their schools. There have been some changes, in that year 2 tests are now teacher assessed and year 9 SATs were withdrawn in 2009. The results are given in terms of Key Stage Levels of Attainment, which is yet another concept governors have to understand and monitor. These not only refer to SATs but are looked at throughout the year, and in my primary school, through the RAP. Key Stage 2 (year 6) results are used as the baseline

from which all progress in the secondary school is measured. Secondary schools, such as the one I am familiar with, which serve areas with high levels of deprivation, are given a tough challenge by the Department for Education (DfE) as the intake often includes a number of children at age 11 who have not even reached level 2 (the expected level for a 7-year-old). Progress for secondary schools, as measured by the DfE and Ofsted, assumes no child arrives below a level 2!

From the moment a child enters school, even at the age of 4 years 1 week, as in the case of our granddaughter, he or she is measured and tested by one means or another, leading to a tendency for more formalised approaches in the classroom. This is best illustrated by the exasperated comment by the same granddaughter, now in year 1, aged just 5 years: 'It is all work, work, work!!'

Governors' 'learning walks', accompanied by a member of staff, from which governors get to know all aspects of the school on a working day, are now much more focused on particular issues related to the quality of teaching and learning and raising attainment. Formalisation of classroom activities is also reflected in one aspect that senior staff in both primary and secondary schools look for, and that is the 'non-negotiables'. My only comment on this is that for the two schools where I am a governor, teachers can still bring individuality into their lessons, but consistency across the school, with children knowing what to expect as a school norm, is bringing results.

Of the many changes during 28 years as a comprehensive school governor, the most significant was the ending of General Certificate of Education (GCE) O Levels and Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) exams and the introduction of General Certificate of Secondary Education exams (GCSEs) in 1986, with the first exams in 1988. Our son took some O levels at the end of year 10 and the bulk of his exams were GCSEs at the end of year 11. This was followed by the introduction of the National Curriculum by the 1988 Education Reform Act, which also brought about the Key Stages and also Local Management of Schools (LMS). Governors had to come to terms with the idea of core subjects and approving a curriculum organisation that allowed for the core subjects but also gave a reasonable choice in the rest. Hopefully this would allow students to achieve the greatest success and fit them for the range of post-16 options. Such success is also important for the school, in order to secure a high place in the league tables as, under LMS, funding is by pupil numbers, and success means a good intake and income.

Innovations

'Bog standard', the description applied to comprehensive schools by Alastair Campbell, was most damaging in that, across the media, it became the accepted narrative. It is totally at odds with my experience in secondary schools in Inner London, Leicester, Leicestershire, Hampshire and Southampton. Secondary schools in Southampton have always sought to have individual characteristics. In the case of my school, teaching Latin is one of them. Children from the

school compete successfully in Latin competitions with private schools such as Winchester College.

Although it had a mixed reception, the Labour Government's introduction of specialist colleges, in part to change 'bog standard' schools, was taken up by schools because in fact they have always sought to have their own ethos. My school became a maths and computing college in 2004. Unfortunately, that was also the year it was put in 'special measures' by Ofsted. Governors, along with a new head teacher, switched all their efforts to addressing improving teaching and learning and raising attainment, which also meant looking at the curriculum. A major innovation was to make the transition year, year 7, more successful. A distinct year 7 area was created with its own curriculum. This was reported on in *FORUM*, volume 53, number 2, in 2011. Reviewed and amended, the approach continues to this day. Underachievement in working-class children was attributed both to issues of attendance and to the need for a curriculum that these children could relate to. The introduction of a hairdressing salon and facilities for motorcycle maintenance raised attendance and, coincidentally, achievement over all. When the Government removed modern foreign languages from the core subjects, governors, reluctantly, approved the head teacher's decision not to push the study of languages as a choice for GCSEs, although these remained in the options. I requested a minority view be recorded in the minutes registering my concern that this was a backward step and not in the best long-term interests of the students. Languages are now back as part of the Ebacc and this year students achieved GCSEs in French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, German, Dutch, Urdu, Portuguese, Polish, Turkish and Persian; an indication of the diverse school community.

The school also introduced GCSE equivalent vocational subjects, although not to the extent that some schools did, as we recorded a good showing in EBacc results compared with neighbouring schools. Michael Gove's decision to discount most GCSE equivalent courses from official success criteria has caused governors great concern as such courses have been very effective in raising the aspiration and success of a number of students, enabling them to access courses at sixth-form college. Governors have supported the school in devising a curriculum offering, at Key Stage 4, that balances the government view of what is valuable with that which we know gives the best chance of success for our students. This approach could affect our overall GCSE statistics in a very competitive secondary school environment. This year students took Business and Technology Education Council exams (BTECs) in Science, Business Studies, Childcare, Media Gaming, Sport and Work Skills.

Four years ago, a joint senior leadership and governors' strategic review concluded that literacy needed a much higher profile. Literacy had not been ignored, but it was felt necessary to raise its status across all curriculum areas. Investment was made in training both teachers and teaching assistants in the latest methods to improve reading in secondary-age children. The reading ages of some of the poorest achievers shot up, confidence in accessing the whole school curriculum increased and results have rapidly improved. In 2013 the

school was one of the top most-improved schools in the country. It seems obvious now, but the joint agreement to invest heavily in training and staff to improve literacy levels rapidly came out of considered analysis of data and classroom experience.

Success Story

Now schools are coming to terms with the loss of modular courses and a reduction in coursework content. Thanks to Michael Gove, students will be judged on their ability to perform only in end-of-year written exams. This policy, put forward in the name of rigour, totally ignores the range of ways children learn and can demonstrate their learning and understanding. Governors are in receipt of pamphlets explaining the new English and maths exams and are wondering yet again how teachers, who themselves are subject to more and more scrutiny, manage to cope with constant change. In 28 years we seem to have come full circle, from O-Level end-of-year written exams to GCSE end-of-year written exams, which might as well be renamed O Levels. However, this time, there is not the CSE to go alongside.

It has been an immense privilege to support a comprehensive school over so many years and through its ups and downs. I am an ardent believer in comprehensive education and that comprehensive schools in the United Kingdom are a success story. This school, which serves Southampton's council estates and inner city as well as the university area, has produced, to my knowledge, in the last 28 years and among many other successes, people who gained first-class degrees at Oxford, the drummer of Coldplay, the songwriter member of Alt-J, a jazz composer and conductor, a professor of chemistry at Cambridge University, teachers, social workers, entrepreneurs, one of Northern Ireland's top music academics, a professional footballer, a surgeon, a pharmacist, a parliamentary candidate for the Green Party, and a humanitarian worker who lost his life in Kabul and was commemorated by David Cameron in Parliament – and it still teaches Latin and competes with Winchester College!

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