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Book Reviews

Improving School Governance:
how better governors make better schools
NIGEL GANN, 2016, 2nd edn
Abingdon: Routledge
249 pp. £22.49. ISBN 978-1-138-83284-8 (paperback)

This book begins in a challenging, questioning way:

> What could be more unlikely – or extraordinary – than the governing of schools? ... How extraordinary! That 350,000 or so people, almost all of them past school attenders, and many parents or grandparents of current school attenders, should be involved in sitting down with all those clever people engaged 25/7 with 'schooling' and deciding with them, as equals, or even as their bosses how the school should go on. (pp. 1-2)

It continues to question and challenge throughout its pages. For the most part it makes for easy reading, though its messages aren't always easy or comfortable – for governments, for education professionals or for governors themselves. Virtually every aspect of school governance is addressed somewhere in the text, to an extent that some of the book's key messages can get lost in the detail. In one sense the book helps demystify school governance by discussing its origins, its development over time, its current context ('crisis' or 'opportunity' or both?) and the various ways governing bodies/boards operate, can operate or should operate. In a different sense it leaves this reader a little mystified: in the real world how far is school governance possible, whether the business version promoted by minister John Nash or the community-centred, revamped stakeholder model championed by lifelong governance expert Nigel Gann?

As the chair of governors of a secondary school which has voted twice not to become an academy because it sees itself as the community's school, I fully endorse Gann's basic premise that 'people have a right (and a duty) to run the organisations that impact on their lives' (p. 4), though quite what the word 'run' involves is contentious, as it should be in a democracy. I agree with his view

that governors should challenge and hold to account professionals *from the core of the community served by the school*; that they should contribute robust and rigorous questioning from *outside* the profession; and that they should make themselves accountable to the communities and the people the school serves. His warning about the current government's preferred 'business' model, which attempts to minimise governors' democratic function and to focus on their role in the educational marketplace, is persuasively made. So is his view that the lay, common-sense, committed but semi-detached element in governance needs preserving and nourishing. If governors 'are absorbed into the educational community, if they are commodified and turned into just one more piece in the professional jigsaw, something will be lost ... – a way to engage the whole community in the schooling of its children' (p. 86).

Gann is concerned too about the fragmentation of the education system and its governance. He argues powerfully for local governance of schools to be complemented by the partial restoration of local coordination, oversight and monitoring of educational provision through the re-creation of Local Education Boards, which would be partly directly elected by the public and partly elected by governors of existing educational establishments. His subheading, 'What might it look like?', embodies an appropriate degree of tentativeness but also a wistful dream-like quality suggestive of hope rather than realistic expectation that the government's business-oriented, semi-privatised, performance-driven and individualistic model of educational provision and governance is likely to change in the near or medium-term future.

The book provides a very useful overview of how school governance has tortuously evolved, though its claim to trace this from the Dark Ages (!) to the present is somewhat overstated. It provides plenty of evidence for its contention that 'Except for a very brief period towards the end of the nineteenth century the voice of the community, the voice of ordinary people who pay for education through their local tax has rarely been heard' (p. 9). It makes valuable parallels between debates surrounding the 1870 Act – seen essentially as a conflict between protagonists of different visions of society – and the current debate over who should have control over the education system in both its academic and socialising roles. The criticism of the educational community in the twentieth century for not embracing lay involvement in governance with enthusiasm seems a little misplaced given the predominant zeitgeist until the advent of consumerism. The role of the local education authorities in 'running' schools post the 1944 Act and pre the 1988 Act is perhaps overplayed: were they really 'central to the monitoring of performance and even to the effective determination of the curriculum'? In this respect the text may, inadvertently, be giving succour to those propagating the myth of 'council-run schools' as they seek to undermine local accountability and democracy in pursuit of academisation and the autonomy it claims to bring.

Gann accepts the Department for Education's advice to talk of 'governing boards', rather than 'governing bodies' – a sensible decision given the current context. However, it does indirectly and inadvertently reinforce Nash's business

model where governors operate as a board similar to the board of trustees of a charity or the board of directors of a company. Gann is particularly valuable in helping distinguish between strategic and operational matters – an issue that still dogs too many governing bodies. However, he does recognise the complexities – nicely captured in his memorable comment, later exemplified, that 'the job of the governing board is to be strategic – and never operational (except sometimes). And the job of the head teacher is to be operational (except sometimes)' (p .111)!

He accepts, as do most of us chairs of governors, the three core strategic functions of governance stated in current Department for Education statutory guidance. In a challenging chapter he cuts through a mass of verbiage and discusses a range of activities that can support governors as they seek to ensure 'clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction' and as they undertake other aspects of their strategic role. There's plenty of valuable advice, often memorably expressed: 'Being strategic is a state of mind' (p. 79); 'Keeping a strong focus on strategic matters seems as much a political requirement as a social one, but good governing boards of improving schools will keep their eyes on the hills while negotiating the marshy lowlands of regulations and expectations' (p. 79). Based on his extensive experience of advising governing bodies, he provides plentiful examples to illustrate his points but at times his advice can appear somewhat idealistic, as when, for example, he suggests a six-stage process for reviewing and creating a school policy (p. 61). In discussing how mission statements, policies and targets might be evaluated by governors, he perhaps overstates the importance and relevance of the measurable, rather than the judgeable. Governors are far better at judging than measuring!

There is a wealth of advice, some of it prescription disguised as description, accompanied by practical examples on virtually all the issues facing governing bodies/boards – the responsibilities, roles and right of governors; governance, leadership and management; governance and school inspection; schools, parents and the community; evaluating governance. In some ways there is almost too much material, too much advice; too much to take in. It needs to be read selectively, not taken as a package on effective governance to be adopted wholesale. The author recognises this: 'This book does not need to be read from cover to cover. You can dip into it as it suits you, although there is a logic to the shape' (p. 5) There is indeed, though the internal logic of some chapters is less clear.

As someone interested in the history of state education the book provides me with a valuable overview of the development of governance: a neglected area of research and scholarship. It would, for example, be fascinating to know in detail how school boards actually operated during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and whether there are implications for the new-style Local Education Boards Gann persuasively advocates. As a firm believer in the importance of local democracy, local accountability and local community involvement in education, I find the author's advocacy of a revamped stakeholder model both supportive and convincing. As a chair of governors I

find the ideas, policies and practices in the book very helpful, though, I have to say, daunting.

I am left wondering whether the demands made on governance in England need a radical review to make it possible for ordinary mortals like me to undertake, with the help of people like Nigel Gann, the very necessary oversight of 'our' schools.

Colin Richards

'So the new could be born …'.
The Passing of a Country Grammar School
PETER HOUSDEN, 2015
Edinburgh: APS Group (Scotland) Limited
81pp. Free (eBook). ISBN 978-0-85759-034-3 (paperback)
http://aps.publishingthefuture.info/publication/peter-housden-passing-of-a-country-grammar-school

With the current government allowing grammar schools to expand, selective versus comprehensive education is still very much a live issue. Peter Housden's book, *The Passing of a Country Grammar School*, is an interesting contribution to the debate. It explains how Market Drayton Grammar School in Shropshire, which celebrated its four hundredth anniversary in November 1955, became The Grove Comprehensive School in 1965, and asks, 'How did such a change come to such a sleepy town, and so early, well before the main thrust of comprehensive reform in the 1970s and '80s?' (p. 1).

Housden is well qualified to answer the question: he was educated at the schools concerned and has had an extensive career in both local and national government. He begins by providing a history of Market Drayton Grammar School: its foundation in 1555, its closure in 1909, and its reopening a year later by the local education authority. He notes that the school went through a difficult period in the aftermath of the Second World War and that in 1956 Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) found weaknesses 'in leadership, in organisation and in pedagogy' (p. 28).

He goes on to consider two key figures: Martin Wilson, who had been Secretary for Education in Shropshire since 1934, and Sir Offley Wakeman, Chairman of Shropshire County Council and its Education Committee. These two were responsible for producing Shropshire's post-war Development Plan, which proposed 'full comprehensive reorganisation' for some of the smaller market towns, including Market Drayton, where a single secondary school in a new building would replace the existing grammar and secondary modern

schools. In most cases, this would require 'the closure of an established and more-or-less ancient grammar school' (p. 41).

The Ministry was unhappy with Shropshire's proposals and the matter was 'left in abeyance' until 1952 when, facing rising pupil numbers, the Education Committee proposed closing the town's grammar and secondary modern schools and opening a new comprehensive school for a thousand pupils. The local response was almost unanimously hostile, so the authority withdrew its plans and instead proposed a new secondary modern school for 450 pupils. This opened in 1957 but was already short of space, so in 1962, the Education Committee pressed ahead with its earlier proposal for a comprehensive school. The grammar school's governors raised a number of objections, and consultation meetings with parents showed mixed views. However, following visits to comprehensive schools in Wolverhampton, the governors of both the grammar and secondary modern schools voted in favour of the reorganisation and the Education Committee approved the scheme in April 1963. Housden comments:

> Thus far, from the point of view of Martin Wilson and the Education Committee, the proposal for Market Drayton had gone forward without undue alarums or excursions. Extensive consultations had been held and Governors given the opportunity to visit comprehensive schools – it was a model of a modern education authority at its work. (p. 57)

There was, however, some local resentment. With approval still to be sought from the Minister, Sir Edward Boyle, Old Grammarian Ron Farrell launched a campaign against the reorganisation. Boyle, however, was a 'radical conservative' who wished to 'preserve the essential character of British society not through stasis but through humane and rational reform' (p. 63).

In July 1963 Prime Minister Harold Macmillan sought Boyle's advice on what should be done about the 11-plus. In his reply, Boyle argued that 'a system of completely separate schools is unlikely to be the best answer either in a new housing area where one can plan from the beginning, or in a scattered country district' (p. 65). As this exchange took place, Shropshire's proposals were on Boyle's desk. They included comprehensive schools for Telford New Town – exactly the sort of 'new housing area' Boyle had mentioned in his minute to the prime minister, and for Market Drayton, which was at the centre of 'a scattered country district' (p. 65). Few were surprised, therefore, when Boyle announced his decision to approve the County Council's proposals. Market Drayton's new school would open on 1 September 1965. Farrell called for an inquiry but others, including the head of the grammar school, A.F. ('Alf') Tongue, who now applied for the headship of the new school, were more positive. In the event, Donald Mackay, Senior Master at Monk's Park Comprehensive in Bristol, was appointed to the post.

It was the end of an era, says Housden: Tongue died in late 1964, Martin Wilson retired as Secretary for Education in June 1965, and Donald Mackay,

'having taken the reins of both schools after Mr Tongue's death, became the first Head Teacher of The Grove School at its opening in September 1965' (p. 70).

Housden argues that a number of factors led to the decision to reorganise Market Drayton's schools, including:

- demographic changes which made the grammar school more vulnerable (p. 71);
- the fact that its two post-war heads – Hesketh and Tongue – while 'honourable men', lacked vision and drive (p. 71);
- the school's 'historically shallow roots', with no Foundation or powerful alumni (p. 72);
- the fact that it faced 'an education authority with a vision' and a Minister 'with the reforming cast of Edward Boyle' (p. 72); and
- the growing public disquiet about the eleven plus (p. 73).

Today, fifty years on from the founding of the school, 'there have been huge changes in the structure of the economy, in demography and in values', says Housden. There are now 'far higher levels of expectation, of scrutiny and of measurement of schools performance' (p. 77). He notes that in 1958-60, just 17.5% of the pupils of Market Drayton's grammar and secondary modern schools had left school 'with a meaningful basket of qualifications' (p. 77). In 2014, the equivalent figure for The Grove was 55% per cent. In 1958-60, 6% of pupils had achieved at least one A-level pass; in 2014, 22% did so.

Housden argues that this 'significant increase in opportunity' for the young people of Market Drayton is what Martin Wilson had hoped and planned for. Its achievement required 'the end of selective education and the closure of the Grammar School'.

While acknowledging that the passing of an institution with such a long history is always sad, he suggests that Market Drayton County Grammar School was ... a creature of its age, and its passing was a necessary precondition for the establishment of a common school in Market Drayton. Its closure was achieved with openness and dignity, and enabled the comprehensive to get off to a flying start. The process has enabled The Grove, which proudly celebrated its fiftieth birthday in 2015, to provide not for some part of the youth of the realm, but for all (p. 78).

The Passing of a Country Grammar School is a very enjoyable read for a number of reasons and at several levels. Housden says his book is 'not an academic treatise' so he has 'avoided an excess of footnotes' (p. 2). He has, however, researched his subject extensively, as his list of 'Sources consulted' demonstrates. 'I was stimulated as much as frustrated', he says, 'by the fact that the Ministry's file on the reorganisation has been "weeded out" and is lost' (p. 2).

It is certainly not a dry factual account. The characters involved – notably Alf Tongue, Martin Wilson, Ron Farrell and Donald Mackay – are brought to life, their actions discussed in relation to their motives and beliefs. It is

enlivened by personal memories and anecdotes. Housden draws on the memoir of Gwyn Lewis, who attended the grammar school from 1942 to 1947. 'The school had the trappings of the traditional grammar school', with a good library and an annual Founders' Day service in the local church 'at which staff wore their caps and gowns and the proceedings were brought to a close with the school song' (p. 22).

And there are Housden's own recollections. He joined the grammar school as a 12-year-old in May 1963, six years after Tongue had been appointed head. He remembers it as 'small and friendly ... with a settled routine and good discipline'. It still had 'All the accoutrements of the Grammar School' (p. 31), though the streaming of new entrants had been abolished. Like many other grammar schools, it went through 'cycles of mediocrity and found it difficult to generate rigour and momentum' (p. 35).

He moved to The Grove, which opened on 1 September 1965 with 1096 pupils, and paints a vivid picture of life in his new school. There was little trouble between former grammar and secondary modern school pupils, he says. 'We had our share of silliness and posturing and the very occasional nasty incident, as any school will. But order and discipline were good. Students mixed as freely in the comprehensive as they had in their primary schools' (p. 75). The Grove benefited from some able staff including Roy Nevitt, who 'established drama as a major force in the curriculum and life of the school, staging plays by Brecht and Arthur Miller, and involving us in a joint production with Newport Girls Grammar of Hugo Cole's opera, *Jonah and the Whale*, with the young Benjamin Luxom in the title role' (pp. 75-76). There was 'a sense of energy and purpose in the school, and attention to individual progress' (p. 76).

When Mackay left in 1968, the governors appointed as his successor H.A. Behenna, who 'positioned himself at arm's length from the Main School', moving his office to Grove House and taking the carpet from the Sixth Form Common Room to furnish it. 'Fuelled slightly by student protests in the wider world', Housden recalls, 'we took umbrage at this and other restrictions. Frictions continued'. Behenna left in 1972 'after much acrimony' (p. 77).

The book works at both a local and a national level. It will appeal to Market Draytonians and others interested in the history of the area, but also to education historians more generally. The correspondence between Minister Edward Boyle and Prime Minister Harold Macmillan is particularly interesting.

Finally, Housden is a passionate believer in comprehensive schools and says he wants to 'add my voice to those willing to speak up for comprehensive education', which he describes as 'without doubt the most significant reform in our schooling system in the post-war period, and a huge success by any standards' (pp. 1-2). Again, the book addresses the issue at both a local and national level.

The Passing of a Country Grammar School is available to download in a variety of formats. I hope it will be widely read, not just because it is free but because it is enjoyable, informative and important. At a time when few politicians seem to have anything positive to say about comprehensive schools

and when selection is still very much on the agenda, Housden's message – that comprehensive education is about providing 'not for some part of the youth of the realm, but for all' (p. 78) – is one which needs to be heard.

Derek Gillard

John Dewey's '*Democracy and Education*' 100 Years On: past, present, and future relevance

September 28 - October 1, 2016
Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

The Faculty and Homerton College are hosting a major 3-day international conference marking the publication centenary of Dewey's most popular, influential and controversial book. We welcome submissions from History of Education, Philosophy of Education, educational policy, and also more practically focused papers from educators seeking to integrate Deweyan perspectives and principles in their work.

The conference will consist of keynotes, parallel sessions, panel sessions with a policy focus, interactive presentations from educators and students, and a trip to the new University of Cambridge Primary School.

Full information about themes and speakers, plus registration details, can be found at

www.educ.cam.ac.uk/events/conferences/dewey2016/

Conference registration is also open to those not presenting.