

Strengthening School Governance in Wales: A Community of Enquiry Approach

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ABSTRACT

In 2013 Welsh Government implemented legislation which specified mandatory training for school governors in Wales. The training coincides with sustained improvement in school governance according to reports of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education and Training in Wales (Estyn). This article sets the scene with a brief incursion into literature on governance of schools in England. The absence of recent empirical studies in a Welsh context means there is little beyond Estyn reports to evaluate the efficacy of the mandatory training. The authors of this article developed, delivered and evaluated a pilot training programme for governors, based on the UNESCO definition of governance. Findings indicate the need for enhancements to governor development which go beyond monitoring school performance. The authors have identified a need to improve critical thinking and strategic planning which would enable governors and head-teachers to work collaboratively, taking account of the external policy context and the vision and values of the school.

Key words: governance, Wales, education strategy.

Introduction

The three authors of this article came together to take forward a shared interest in the efficacy of school governor training. As experienced school governors ourselves, with an interest in both governance and education policy, we were curious to explore the extent to which mandatory governor training in one region of Wales was appropriate for preparing new and existing governors for this important role.

Our discussions led us to a shared sense of the skills and qualities a school governor might require. We also came to a realisation that the needs and desires of the diverse people who make up approximately 23,000 school governors in Wales (Welsh Government, 2016) could not be met by one model of delivery. We decided to develop and pilot a short course open to school governors from one local authority in Wales. Following discussions with the director of education, we began by accrediting a suite of three 15 credit Master's level modules as part of a postgraduate education framework at a Welsh university. These Master's level modules incorporated highly analytical discussion around the principles and ethics of governance in public and third sectors, and their application to the specific contexts of formal education including schools and other formal education in the nations of the United Kingdom and beyond. Further discussion revealed that our pilot short course needed to be accessible to a more diverse range of governors. A pragmatic approach was needed to facilitate dialogue and critical thinking around the processes of school governance in practice. We developed an accredited short course 'Strengthening School Governance' consisting of 10 credits at level 3. A partnership was developed with the university's Widening Access unit, which allowed us to fund and pilot our level 3 module with new and experienced governors at community venues in the local authority area.

This article draws on early data from the first pilot. Data were gathered from the first cohort via a focus group following participants' assessed peer presentations, and from our own reflective observations. These early findings represent a valid and reliable stand-alone evaluation of the initial pilot, which will be augmented by subsequent data collection with this cohort and future cohorts as we develop a larger study. The findings are therefore indicative and will inform our future practice. The larger study, of which this forms the first strand, will seek to make evidence-based recommendations for building capacity amongst governing bodies, and for development of individual governors.

Our development of this project arose out of an interest in whether the mandatory training was efficacious preparation for what we understood governance to be. Influenced by the UNESCO (2017) definition (discussed in the next section) we took the approach that good governance is about holding the school to account by: strategic planning and goal setting; oversight of progress towards achievement of strategic goals; ensuring the school is operating ethically, equitably, and within the law; oversight of educational and financial performance data; acting in the interests of all stakeholders. This would be achieved by effective partnership working with the headteacher and senior managers, and with cognisance of local and national policy imperatives.

The first section of this article will discuss the concept of school governance and its application in the context of schools in England and Wales. The second section will consider the contemporary context of governor preparation in Wales, and the rationale for the content and delivery of the level 3 module to the first cohort. The third section will present and analyse the focus group data, and the article will conclude with some evaluative comments on the way forward for governor preparation in Wales.

Towards conceptualizing school governance and its role

For the purposes of this article we will be using the concept of public sector governance as defined by UNESCO (2017). This definition refers to norms, values, structures and processes designed to ensure accountability, transparency, rule of law, stability, equity and inclusiveness, responsiveness, empowerment and broad-based participation. The UNESCO concept of governance refers to its subtle nature, meaning it is often not observable. Authors writing about school governance in the contexts of England (James et al., 2012; James et al., 2013) and Wales (Farrell, 2014) have also referred to its low profile. We concur with the view of James et al. (2013) that it is arguably right for governors to remain backstage whilst those responsible for front-line education provision should have the highest profile. James et al. (2013) make three additional points about school governance in England, which are of particular interest to our position on strengthening school governance in Wales. The first is that the significance of the responsibility of governing bodies is not widely acknowledged and is paid insufficient attention in policy terms. Secondly, the range and scope of governing body

responsibilities are not clearly understood. Thirdly, the time commitment and contribution of governors is not widely recognised.

The UNESCO (2017) definition goes on to state that: ‘governance is about the culture and institutional environment in which citizens and stakeholders interact among themselves and participate in public affairs. It is more than the organs of the government.’ The organisational culture and environment are likely to be indicative of the extent and limitations of the roles governors are being prepared for, and equally the extent and limitations of other key players in the governance and operational management of schools. Table 1 gives a broad indication of the differentiation between governance and management.

It should be recognised that headteachers are usually members of the governing body so would have a part to play in the governance function. We suggest, however, that the reality of the relationship between the governance and operational management of schools may be better expressed by Wenger’s (1998:114) ‘practice connections’. These connections are defined as ‘peripheries’, ‘overlaps’ and ‘boundary practices’ whereby different workplace communities differentiate and interlock at various points in time. So, for example, in matters of a largely operational nature, the role of the governing body might be limited to the headteacher’s

Table 1: The difference between governance and management (UNESCO, 2017)

<i>Governance</i>	<i>Management</i>
Set the norms, strategic vision and direction and formulate high-level goals and policies.	Run the organisation in line with the broad goals and direction set by the governing body.
Direct and oversee the management to ensure that the organisation is achieving the desired outcomes and to ensure that the organisation is acting prudently, ethically and legally.	Implement the decisions within the context of the mission and strategic vision.
Oversee management and organisational performance to ensure that the organisation is working in the best interests of the public, and more specifically the stakeholders who are served by the organisation’s mission.	Make operational decisions and policies, keep the governance bodies informed and educated. Be responsive to requests for additional information.

peripheral engagement with the chair or a specific link governor, whereas issues like pupil exclusions, staff redundancy and budget monitoring might be considered as areas where the headteacher and the governors overlap. Wenger's notion of 'boundary practices' as a sustained 'ongoing forum for mutual engagement' may be related to more strategic matters such as developing goals and value statements (1998: 114).

We would also like to respond to UNESCO's view that governance is more than the organs of the government. This is perhaps where the rhetoric and reality of governance may become confused or even polarised in the context of schools. The role of the governance function is to set strategic vision, goals and policies, yet it could be argued this function is restricted by the targets of funders, and instruments of audit and inspection; these being the means by which the hegemonic agendas of government and local authority may be exercised (Ball, 2003).

There is a focus in the literature on the extent to which school governors, in reality, get to exercise a strategic function. 'The governing body represents an important element of school leadership; it is the strategic, accountable body for the school' (Earley, 2013: 79). Commentators have suggested that governing bodies need to work in partnership with the head-teacher and other senior leaders, melding a supportive and a challenging role; however research indicates governing bodies tend to assume more of a scrutiny or endorsing role.

Earley's book *Exploring the School Leadership Landscape* (2013), is based on a series of studies into the nature of school leadership in England, three of which (Earley et al., 2002; Stevens et al., 2005; Earley et al., 2012) included examination of the role of the governing body in strategic leadership. When considering the role the governing body should play, compared with the role it actually plays, all three studies found a disparity between the views of chairs of governing bodies or other governors, and the views of headteachers. In the 2012 study, for example, 79 per cent of chairs thought the governing body should have a major role on the school's strategic leadership, whereas only 46 per cent of headteachers shared this view. Similar discrepancies existed between chairs and headteachers in relation to the strategic roles governors actually played.

Stevens et al. (2005) found that the amount of training governors had received influenced their perceptions of the effectiveness of the governing body, and those who had received more training were more likely to report that they worked well in partnership with the headteacher. Indeed, it is likely that strengthening the skills base of the governing body via training

and development would improve its effectiveness, but the nature of that training will be crucial in preparing governors for understanding the nature of their role and achieving the capacity to fulfil said role. Earley et al. (2012) focused only on chairs of governors (n 347), and 60 per cent of chairs felt that they needed to develop their skills in building the capacity of the governing body, closely followed by preparing for the new inspection framework; 42 per cent of chairs felt that they needed to develop their strategic thinking and planning skills. We are interested in the findings of this English study, in particular for its revelation that chairs of governing bodies considered it within their remit to build the capacity of the governing body, yet needed to develop their skills in doing so.

Earley (2013) notes that in the ten years between 'Establishing the Current State of School Leadership in England' (Earley et al., 2002) and 'Review of the School Leadership Landscape' (Earley et al., 2012) some schools had been able to enhance the overall strategic leadership of the governing body. This had been a recommendation of the 2002 study, but was by no means universally achieved, remaining an unfulfilled goal for a significant number. Unsurprisingly Earley (2013) suggests that the provision of training courses and development opportunities for governing bodies would enhance their roles as leaders, but expresses concern at the demise of local authority governor training provision and support in the English context.

Gann (2015) recommends an annual governors' visioning day, revisiting the ethos of the school and its aspirations expressed through action planning. Considering the manner in which UNESCO (2017) differentiates between governance and management, such strategic activity should surely be intrinsic to the role of the school governing body. Earley's (2013) observations indicate that this is probably not the case for many governing bodies. Gann (2015) draws on comments from Fergal Roche, chief executive of The Key, a professional development service for school leadership and governance in England. We may infer from Roche's statement that his experience tells him governors in England are not fulfilling their strategic leadership roles:

the governing body runs the school, with the head acting as their principal agent to do so. The head reports to the board. The main role of the governing body is not, in fact, *simply* to support the head. Governors need, in my mind, to be much more demanding of the head. (Roche, 2014)

Earley et al.'s findings (2012) indicate that many headteachers do not share this view of the governance function.

The landscape of school governance in Wales differs somewhat from the English context, in particular because devolved Welsh education policy has not sought to pursue the range of organisation and business models that are a feature of the current English school system. Nevertheless it is the case that the role of school governance and its manifestation in school leadership remains a common area of interest in both national contexts.

Turning our focus to Wales, in 2006 the Welsh Assembly Government (as it was at the time) sought to implement the recommendations of the Beecham Review of Public Services (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006). Beecham advocated a 'citizen model' of participation in public services which purported that public service organisations should design and develop services to meet the needs of all citizens. There was a clear call for organisations to develop and implement ambitious strategies to involve citizens in the design, delivery, monitoring, accountability and improvement of public services (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006).

As many public services rushed to reform their policies and modes of operation to incorporate citizen voice, the model of school governance in Wales was in a good position to chime with this policy agenda of citizen involvement and engagement. The stakeholder model of governance had been in place in England and Wales since the 1986 Education Act. This model, with its emphasis on involving parents, teachers and community members, alongside local authority appointees, appears to lend itself well to the citizen participation model.

The 2009 Welsh Government review of school governance prompted the passing in 2011 of primary legislation which specified requirements for mandatory governor training and clerking, alongside other requirements for collaboration between schools, further education colleges and local authorities. So, whilst the stakeholder model remained in place, Welsh Government took a prescriptive approach to the manner and content of governor training and the conduct of meetings of boards of governors. Following the implementation of this legislation in 2013, Farrell (2014) reported that school governance, in the context of the devolved Welsh education system, had moved from the margins to the centre of policy interest. Farrell (2014) related this to the new performance agenda in schools and the consequent requirement for governors to take more of a role in the school improvement agenda. This, alongside the 2011 governance reforms, had resulted in greater control of governance from the centre of Welsh Government, and demonstrates a shift from the low policy profile of governance articulated earlier.

This increased focus on governor training reflects Earley's comments (2013) about the importance of governor training in enhancing the effectiveness of the strategic role of governors. The idea of governance being more strongly controlled from the centre of government, however, resonates with managerialist critiques such as Baxter (2016: 5) who purports that governance 'marks the changes that have occurred between state and society over the last century, echoing Newman (2001:11) who at the turn of the twentieth century indicated a view that these changes reflect a shift in power "upwards to transnational bodies, and downwards to regions and sub-regions"'. This dispersal of power across a variety of agencies has, according to Newman, resulted in a managerial power whereby said agencies are rewarded or penalised for their ability to achieve government targets. Newman's position is exemplified by Sheard and Avis's (2010) study of a project to enhance community participation in school governance in an English local authority. There was empirical evidence that aspirations of community involvement in governance and devolved decision-making were inhibited by what the authors describe as traditional local authority practices. Local authorities tended to retain control of the innovation and change agendas, and strategies for involving community members were underdeveloped. Whilst the literature on the concept of school governance in England appears to indicate a subtle low policy profile (James et al., 2012; James et al., 2013), Sheard and Avis's study demonstrates such subtlety does not necessarily translate into a light touch approach to power and influence on the part of English local government.

In Wales, as Farrell (2014) points out, the policy emphasis has been more explicitly prescriptive since the 2011 school governance reforms. The next section will explore the nature of governor preparation in the context of centrally prescribed mandatory training and the overt policy interest in the framework for school governance in Wales. We shall see that Welsh Government's policy emphasis on enhancing the role of governors in the school improvement agenda has addressed a crucial aspect of the governing body role – that of monitoring school performance, but does little to enhance other crucial aspects such as ethics, strategic vision and values of the school, and community involvement and stakeholder accountability beyond the school improvement agenda.

Governor preparation in Wales

The previous section has outlined how Wales has retained a stakeholder model of school governance whilst at the same time introducing a prescriptive approach to mandatory training of governors and clerks. Farrell's (2014) comments on the more overt policy interest in school governance in Wales is further exemplified by the recent consultation on school governance reform 'Reform of school governance: regulatory framework: Proposals to revise and consolidate the school governance regulatory framework' (Welsh Government, 2016). This consultation coincided with our discussions around developing a curriculum for strengthening school governance. The consultation was seeking views on a move away from a stakeholder model to a skills model of governance, one in which business skills were foregrounded as the key requirement. We felt that something of the essence of the citizenship model of participation could be lost, and with it the values and ethos of community-facing governance. It was our view that an improved model of preparation for governance could enhance the skills and effectiveness of our existing stakeholder governors in Wales, and our pilot 'Strengthening School Governance' project sought to explore this.

We were also mindful of Welsh Government's comments in the aforementioned consultation document (Welsh Government, 2016) in which it was stated: 'Governing bodies have a vital and demanding role to play in the success of our schools by setting the strategic direction of their school and holding the headteacher to account for the school's educational and financial performance' (Welsh Government, 2016: 3). The document goes on to express concern that additional skills such as the appointment and disciplining of staff are required by governing bodies, and that skills should therefore be a fundamental consideration in the appointment of governors to this challenging and demanding role.

The Welsh Government (2016) also drew on recommendations from the 'The future delivery of education services in Wales' (Welsh Government, 2013b), known as 'The Hill Report'. The Hill Report drew on reports of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education and Training in Wales (Estyn), giving the following overview of school governance in Wales:

In the best schools governors are playing a strong role in shaping a school's future direction and engaging in 'robust and challenging dialogue' about standards of pupil achievement. But, says Estyn, in around a quarter of schools governors have: '... limited knowledge of the school's performance data or do not make

comparisons with similar schools, and rarely challenge or hold leaders to account'. (Welsh Government, 2013b: 60)

Here again we note the emphasis on performance data and standards, priorities which appear to be reflected in the requirement for mandatory data training for school governors.

The consultation (Welsh Government, 2016) does acknowledge the trajectory of improvement in school governance in Wales. There is evidence in the more recent Estyn annual report 2016–17 (Estyn, 2018) that this improvement has been sustained. The report also notes that since 2010, many governors have improved their understanding of how to measure effectiveness, enabling them to hold leaders to account more robustly, largely achieved in partnership with headteachers who, in the best cases of governance, are providing governors with clear, informative performance reports:

School governance has improved over the inspection cycle. Nearly all school governors now have at least a basic level of training that helps them to undertake their duties with growing confidence. Most have a suitable understanding of their school's strengths and priorities for improvement. In schools where governors show commitment to strengthen their roles and to develop their skills, they support and challenge schools to improve, for example by managing the performance of headteachers. In a few schools, governors do not fulfil their role as a critical friend well enough and do not exert enough influence on self-evaluation or improvement planning. (Estyn, 2018: 71)

Having viewed the assessment of governance in the Estyn annual report 2016–17 (Estyn, 2018), we could see that school governance in Wales had shown significant improvement during the period since 2013 when the current mandatory training was introduced. This did not appear to support arguments in the consultation on the governance framework (Welsh Government, 2016) that it was necessary to move from a stakeholder to a skills model; rather it supported our own view that appropriate training and development for governors in a stakeholder model could result in significant improvement over time. We remained concerned, however, that the way in which governance improvement was measured related largely to engagement with school performance data – a vital aspect of good governance, but not the only one. The document *Guidance on Mandatory Training for Governors and Clerks* (Welsh Government, 2013a) explains that The Government of Maintained Schools (Training Requirements for Governors) (Wales) Regulations 2013 requires governors to undertake induction training as follows:

Induction training for governors is vital if they are to understand their role and the parameters of their responsibilities. The induction training will help ensure that new governors:

- have the necessary knowledge and understanding to begin to fulfil their role effectively as a governor and to support their school in raising standards;
- are aware of national and local education issues and their impact on governing bodies; and recognise the importance of training and the need to develop their skills and take advantage of other opportunities available to them;
- develop confidence to enable them to take a full and active part in the role of the governing body.

The training will also reflect the legislative framework for school governance in Wales, and will focus on what should be expected from governors in meeting the requirements of the law and raising standards and school improvement. (Welsh Government, 2013a: 8)

There is clearly an emphasis on an understanding of the governance role in raising standards, and this is exemplified by a significant focus on understanding and interpreting data. The guidance goes on to state:

It will also explain a governor's strategic role and how this supports and challenges the work of the school and the senior leadership team; their role in setting policies and targets and how these should be monitored and evaluated and how and to whom governors are accountable.

The information given to new governors through the induction training will give them the confidence to develop a range of skills which will add value to a governing body through transferable skills such as team working, problem solving, time management and analysing and evaluating information improvement. (Welsh Government, 2013a: 8)

Welsh Government guidance is commensurate with Earley's assertion (2013: 83) that:

the school governing body's role is often conceptualized in terms of three main functions: providing critical friendship to the head and senior staff, ensuring accountability and helping to bring about change and improvement through such activities as monitoring and evaluating the work of the school.

This clearly chimes with our view of the concept of governance. We were aware that the induction training, alongside an additional session on understanding school performance data, are the two core requirements governors must complete to fulfil their mandatory training, so we were keen to explore the extent to which the mandatory training prepared

governors for a strategic role which would include direct involvement in the development and implementation of the school's purpose, vision, values and ethos, and working as part of a team. Having developed and delivered our 'Strengthening School Governance' level 3 curriculum, we would be able to seek comments from participants about the level of its usefulness in strengthening governance, and the extent to which it complemented existing mandatory training.

The Strengthening School Governance Project

We developed and delivered our Strengthening School Governance curriculum in partnership with Governors Wales, an independent advice and guidance organisation for school governors in Wales. We included an introduction to local and national education policy and strategy, development of critical thinking skills, appropriate questioning and challenge, legal matters, standards in public life and strategic planning. Delivery was a combination of short presentations, interactive tasks, discussion, dialogue and Socratic questioning, influenced by the community of enquiry approach based on Dewey (1938) and Lipman (2003). For the assessment, participants were required to choose an aspect of their School Improvement Plan, trace the local and national policy influences, and explain their role as a governor in its implementation. We delivered the curriculum in seven sessions, each of two hours' duration. The final session consisted of assessed presentations to peers, followed by the focus group evaluation. The focus group consisted of three experienced governors and an experienced clerk (Group 1) and two new governors (Group 2). Responses are reported as two groups to preserve anonymity. Group 1 participants had experience of governance in five primary and three secondary schools, and included a chair and a vice-chair of governors. The two new governors in Group 2 had experience of one primary and one secondary school, and also experience of voluntary sector governance.

The project received approval from the university ethics committee. Researchers sought informed consent from participants, and emphasised that their assessment outcomes would be in no way affected by their decision of whether or not to participate. Throughout the course a reflective log was kept in which key observations from tutors were recorded. The three tutors met to discuss their evaluative observations prior to the final session. Tutor reflections were largely focused on group

interaction, modes of delivery and development of critical analytical thinking amongst members of the group.

Focus group members had agreed that the best time to discuss the Strengthening School Governance project would be after the peer presentations, because the presentations represented an important, summative part of the assessment and learning.

Research findings

Reflections from tutors

The sessions were delivered in an informal setting on school premises. This contributed to a relaxed and supportive learning atmosphere in which the group bonded quickly and there was a strong sense of a professional learning community from a very early stage. Participants agreed to share their experiences of governance openly throughout the course, with the proviso that the specific details would not be disclosed outside the group. Tutors noticed clear progress from participants in relation to their strategic and critical thinking. Initially there was a tendency to call on technical and procedural knowledge when discussing case studies in the form of vignettes or from their own practice settings. Tutors used challenge techniques to facilitate development of critical thinking and discussion around doing the right thing ethically and morally, or focusing on the vision and values of the school. Initially there was little sense of strategic agency amongst participants, but by the time the presentations were delivered, participants demonstrated a shift towards critical and strategic thinking and were able to trace the policy influences in their School Improvement Plans. All participants indicated clear plans for how they might take forward their learning from the course.

Perceived differences between Strengthening School Governance and mandatory governor training

There was a general view that the aims and objectives of Strengthening School Governance had not been clearly articulated, and one experienced governor stated:

‘It’s only when you’ve done this course that you realise the difference between this and the induction.’ (Group 1)

‘What I do know about this course, having attended several training courses throughout the ... is that it’s different to anything you will do that’s laid on by the county to deal with a specific topic.’ (Group 1)

Several comments were made about the fact that the mandatory induction is two hours long compared with fourteen hours of Strengthening School Governance. There was a discussion around whether many governors would be willing to devote fourteen hours to developing their skills:

‘You’ve got a motivated bunch of governors here haven’t you who are prepared to give up those 14 hours’.(Group 2)

There was a general view that the seven-week experience offered the opportunity for guided learning between sessions, and some participants felt the tutors could have offered more pointers for learners to take full advantage of the range of reading materials available via the university. There were also favourable comments around the fact that Strengthening School Governance is delivered by tutors who are independent of the local authority and the schools. Participants also valued the fact that they were mixed in terms of levels of experience, which enabled peer learning to take place.

One comment related to the benefits of being able to get to know the participants over the seven sessions:

‘On the induction they don’t know where everyone is at whereas on a longer course you can find out so you know how to pitch it.You can move it on as you go along, change the level.With the two-hour course there is no way to go lower or higher.’ (Group 1)

These comments resonate strongly with the tutor reflections that a strong professional learning community had developed.

Dialogue and reflection amongst participants

Developing the learning community theme, many comments were made on the benefits of being able to take part in discussion and reflection. One experienced governor commented:

‘I think the beauty of this course is the people who are on the course, that’s what made this course, and the varying knowledge and understanding about the subject matter that people had here. It would be interesting to see the next course what you find because they will be different.’ (Group 1)

One of the new governors had recently been on the mandatory induction course and had mentioned Strengthening School Governance to the other participants there:

‘When I raised it at my induction training and mentioned I was doing it, there was a lot of interest amongst new governors writing it down and maybe because people felt they needed something that went beyond what that first induction was giving us ... it was very good but still there wasn’t time for that reflection and discussion.’ (Group 2)

Another experienced governor noted:

‘You build up those relationships, don’t you? At the events you have 2 hours of teaching then you’ve got 10 minutes to quickly catch up with others, 5 minutes of that is catching up on where they’re at, what school they’re at, then you maybe get a chance to say something, whereas here you get that out of the way very quickly, and the next week you can ask something else, so I think that’s a contrast.’ (Group 1)

‘It’s a different teaching experience entirely in that you are not just imparting information.’ (Group 1)

The peer learning was particularly valued:

‘It enhanced the learning experience for less experienced governors, to learn from the experience of others.’ (Group 1)

‘Being in a small group has enabled peer learning, being a new governor it was important to be able to share experiences.’ (Group 2)

‘It’s the interaction that’s really important.’ (Group 1)

It was also noted that the mix of governors from different schools added value:

‘Doing it in one school it would lack the externality.’ (Group 1)

Enhancing knowledge of the strategic role

Participants were able to recognise how they had developed their ability to think strategically:

‘When you reflect on it you realise, whereas maybe from day to day you don’t reflect on it, so when you have to put it together as a presentation you see it as a journey.’ (Group 1)

‘The heart needs to be in the right place, understanding education, understanding future generations, it’s not only about the procedural side of financing and stand- ards.’ (Group 1)

‘There’s a couple of things where it’s helped me, even as an experienced governor. It’s put some flesh on the bones of governance. Talking about the vision. Our school has a vision but to be able to look at that vision and say that’s what we should be doing, that’s great, and also then there’s looking at all the national and local government policies as well, which I hadn’t considered before as all feeding into the same system so those two aspects stood out for me as something new.’ (Group 1)

‘In the induction training there isn’t very much on policy and strategy. There isn’t the time.’ (Group 1)

‘I think it’s more operational isn’t it [induction training], rather than visionary.’ (Group 2)

These reflections prompted some comments on how the thinking of the experienced governors had changed:

‘If the head teacher comes to the governing body and asks for money, we need to know why she’s asking. For example the DCF [Digital Competence Framework] gets thrown round like a football, but it’s how much everybody understands what that is and the implications of it, and Donaldson [the new curriculum], it’s just thrown around.’ (Group 1)

[Referring to the effects of school categorisation] ‘The Green School has the opportunity to apply its vision because it doesn’t have Estyn breathing down its neck. The Red School has very much got to tick the boxes until it can get out of that and then it can start applying its vision. Not having a vision if you are a Red School, in reality that’s what happens.’ (Group 1)

‘Most School Improvement Plans nowadays start from Estyn inspection and categorisation reports. They have become the driving factors because by law you have to address the stuff they say you need to improve so it’s logical and sensible to start with that because that has to be the action.’ (Group 1)

After listening to this discussion one of the new governors suggested that we might include good practice for School Improvement Plans in the curriculum which brought in more of a pragmatic focus which perhaps our curriculum had lacked.

Key relationships

The discussions had encouraged all participants to think carefully about the relationships between governors and headteachers in particular:

‘Obviously the professionals are very aware of policy, but I’m not sure that governors are. They are not as aware as they should be in reality. It is that difference between the strategic and operational. It can be difficult for anyone to recognise that. That’s what I have taken away from here – there is that difference and how you balance that difference.’ (Group 1)

'It's a bit like a cart and horse isn't it? You can have the head teacher coming in and saying – Look we've got to do this – or you can have a governing body that's informed itself and says to the head teacher – what are we doing about this?' (Group 1)

'So much depends on the relationship doesn't it? Thinking of the module on critical thinking, that really opened up a whole vista for me, OK I know what the critical friend role is, but looking at policy and various things in a different light, and having the time to reflect on it, was really important for me, because we don't have time do we? You often scan something quickly, but looking at the slant on it, what the aim and the intention is from a different perspective is very important.' (Group 1)

'My experience is that the critical person for the governing body progressing is the chair. The chair can either stop that or encourage it. He can go 100 per cent behind the head teacher or he can say well this is a mixture and I want to know what you've got to say as well as what the head's got to say.' (Group 1)

'It would be really good to have head teachers [on the course], if people were prepared to give up the time.' (Group 2)

'I think you might be able to get one to come to a session. I don't think you could get one to come to all the sessions. Maybe we could target new heads?' (Group 1)

'It just felt as though there were messages they [head teachers] ought to be hearing.' (Group 2)

'If you feel there's some heads out there who do need to hear the messages that are here, where else are they going to hear them?' (Group 1)

'If your head is a problem allowing the governing body to govern, Estyn will pick up on that.' (Group 1)

Improving confidence

All participants felt more confident in their role. Confidence is one of the key aims of the mandatory training, but there was a general feeling that the extra training was invaluable for improving confidence to effect appropriate challenge. The more experienced governors felt that headteachers are generally the drivers of strategic planning, possibly indicating that headteachers might benefit from more awareness of the need to work in partnership with governors on setting and following a strategic direction for the school, but also recognising that governors also need to be aware of this:

'Some governors can be marginalised if there is a strong head and they want to do that. I think having done this course would give me the confidence not to be put in that position. I'd know I was doing the right thing in trying to challenge that.'

know there's a way of doing it subtly, and without this course, as a new governor it would have taken me a long time to get to that.' (Group 2)

'I must say in all my years of being a school governor it is rarely led by the governing body. It is almost invariably led by the head teacher bringing up the subject and the governing body joining in and bringing it together.' (Group 1)

'I think it depends as well on the personality of your head. Whether they encourage the governing body or whether they take the lead themselves and suppress the governing body.' (Group 1)

Three participants felt that because the course was accredited by a university this gave it a valuable gravitas.

Conclusions and recommendations

The literature suggests that governance usually has a subtle profile (James et al., 2013; UNESCO, 2017). The Welsh Government approach to improving school governance is far from subtle given the approach to mandatory training (Welsh Government, 2013a; Farrell, 2014) and the recent consultation on the framework for governance of schools (Welsh Government, 2016). The most recent Estyn report (Estyn, 2018) indicates a sustained, significant improvement over time in the performance of school governing bodies, which appears to indicate that the mandatory training has been effective. The manner in which these improvements are articulated, however, points to an emphasis on understanding and interpreting school performance data. The absence of recent empirical research with governing bodies in Wales makes it difficult to triangulate these findings. Experiences of governors articulated in our study suggest, however, that improvements are needed to develop the capacity of governing bodies in their strategic planning role, an aspiration of the mandatory training that was not experienced by our sample.

In response to the suggestion that Wales needs to move to a skills model (Welsh Government, 2016), in which governors are selected on the basis of their existing skills, our findings indicate that governors who were appointed using a stakeholder model can operate more effectively and appropriately if they have access to appropriate training and models of delivery. This resonates with the findings of a study of governing bodies in England (Stevens et al., 2005). Our first pilot of Strengthening School Governance points to the feasibility of developing the capacity of existing stakeholder governors rather than needing to move to a skills model. The

combination of a stakeholder model augmented by capacity building offers important gains for the Widening Access to higher education agenda. This is reflected in the fact that the university's Widening Access unit funded the project.

There is, of course, a counter argument relating to the financial cost of delivering this model, and the willingness or ability of stakeholder governors to engage with it. With a skills model it is likely that new governors would already embody many of the attributes related to confidence in strategic planning delivered by Strengthening School Governance. However, governors selected for their strategic and financial-planning skills may not embody a genuine commitment to the values and principles of delivering for the needs of the school and the wider community. Our findings indicate the essence of the professional learning community was invaluable to participants in relation to the sharing of experiences and the chance to discuss values and vision. Comments around the importance of learning about policy threads that may influence a school's vision and values were also important gains unlikely to be brought to the table via a skills model of governance.

Comments from our participants about relationships with headteachers are a particular concern, resonating with Roche's (2014) commentary that governance needs to become a more active function that goes beyond mere reporting between headteacher and governors. There is a danger, however, that if governance capacity is built only with governors and not with head-teachers, the imbalance or lack of common understanding of principles of governance might lead to conflict. We have commented earlier that the reality of school governance may be encapsulated by Wenger's model of practice connections (1998). School governance is a partnership wherein the headteacher and the governors come together with the agents of local and national government at a range of points which need to be appropriately defined and articulated. The nature of these working partnerships may be legitimately peripheral or substantive, depending on the area of work and the extent of its strategic or operational nature. This is potentially an area to be considered by the new National Academy for Educational Leadership (NAEL). There are two recommendations here. One is that governors should be encouraged to take part in accredited NAEL programmes of study, the second is that governance relationships should be considered a core skill on the curriculum for educational leadership so that headteachers coming through the new system have a better understanding of the roles and relationships associated with school governance.

If the Strengthening School Governance curriculum and mode of delivery appear too unwieldy for universal application, perhaps it could be offered as mandatory training to chairs of governing bodies so that it can then be cascaded throughout the governing body under the leadership of the chair. Given findings from England (Earley et al., 2012), a curriculum designed for chairs of governing bodies would also need to incorporate development of capacity for cascading knowledge and skills throughout the governing body.

Concerns expressed in the literature about the hegemony of governance training and practice models strongly influenced by performance targets have some resonance in comments from our participants, particularly those with more experience of governance. It is clear that the mandatory induction session was largely well received by our participants, and was well delivered. It was, however, considered rather short and one-dimensional, its limitations meaning it was unable to go beyond imparting information, with no scope for critical and creative thinking through discourse and reflection. Induction training that is limited in this way is unlikely to develop governors beyond the uncritical acceptance of information, and will do little to encourage a healthy questioning of the status quo.

Strengthening School Governance participants who already had experience of school governance in Wales initially viewed their role through the lens of the mandatory training. Prior to taking part in Strengthening School Governance they were unable to conceptualise the extended strategic planning role and its links with local and national education policy. It is not our intention to comment on whether this is by accident or design, but it is clear from the experience of our participants that the quality and depth of their strategic and policy knowledge was greatly enhanced and deepened by Strengthening School Governance, and this can only improve their capacity for exercising higher levels of autonomous thought as they take forward their learning as governors. Indeed there are good practice examples on the Estyn website that also point to the benefits of this approach.

Earley's studies on the need for improvement in partnership working between governors and headteachers via improvements in provision of training should be noted here, and we recommend more research of this nature in the Welsh context. Our research participants were mindful of the need to include headteachers in the Strengthening School Governance dialogue. School leadership should be a workplace community consisting

of headteachers, key staff and school governors. These key players would benefit from developing together using a community-of-enquiry approach (Dewey, 1938; Lipman, 2003) to develop shared dialogue that is visionary, challenging, and ambitious. Wenger's model of practice connections (1998) would be a useful place to start thinking about how improvements to preparation for school governance can be inclusive of all key players, and the new NAEL would do well to consider this.

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