
Making sense of school governing in England: Sources of information and challenges

Comment les school governors anglais donnent du sens à leur action : enjeux et sources d'information

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Making sense of school governing in England: Sources of information and challenges

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RÉSUMÉ : Changes to the English education system which have led to greater financial and curricular autonomies for schools along with increasing numbers of academy chains and federation trusts have combined to create a very complex environment for school governance. Drawing on previous studies into working identities in the public sector, this study investigates the ways in which school governors are making sense of their environment, and therefore are professionalizing their role. Using qualitative data from interviews with 30 governors, combined with quantitative data drawn from an ongoing project into governor identities, this paper looks at the myriad sources of information governors are using in order to make sense of their role. The study then appraises the challenges that they are facing, in a context of school reforms that place profound emphasis on education as a market; in the longer term, this may affect recruitment and retention of governors.

KEYWORDS: headteacher, school management, skill development, information

English governors in a context of school performance

England and Wales have a fairly unique system of school governance, a system which has in response to both educational and political imperatives that are particular to it alone (Lawton, 1978; Sallis, 1988b). The 1944 Education Act laid down a partnership between central and local government and sets out in some detail the roles of governors¹ and the division of responsibilities between the LEA (Local Education Authority²) and individual school bodies. The Act changed the shape and form of governing boards, increasing their powers and specifically articulating their *modus operandi*. Although other countries have systems of education governance that

1 School governors are volunteers who are appointed in order to provide strategic and financial oversight of English (and Welsh) schools. Governors require no formal qualifications but must be available for regular meetings and school visits. There are about 300 000 school governors in England (2015).

2 Local government controlled education department.

are based on local control, this is often directed from local government organisations or representation (see for example, Moos and Paulsen, 2014).

Changes to education policy combined with a political vision which proposed a more democratic form of governance for schools emerged during the 1960 and resulted in The Taylor Report (1977), arguably one of the most influential reforms on school governance since the 1944 Act. It recommended that the LEA, parents, teachers, older pupils and the local community should be represented on governing bodies, and that all LEAs should provide training and development for governors (Baxter, 2015). It was shortly followed by the Education Act 1980 which allows any governor to stand for Chair rather than confining that role to governors representing the Local Education Authority.

The 1988 Education Reform Act which introduced a national curriculum and centralised education by removing power from Local Education Authorities and greatly increasing the powers of the Secretary of State for Education, has been one of the most profound influences on school governing since the Second World War. One of the most substantial changes introduced by the act was the introduction of school self-management- Local Management of Schools (LMS) - which aimed to provide, “the right blend of state, market and democratic institutions to guarantee peace, inclusion, wellbeing and stability” (Harvey, 2005, p.10).

For the Conservative government of the time, the 1988 Act was directed at the creation of more competition between schools and reduce what were seen as inefficiencies in the system. It was also intended to create the notion of “the user” (parents and pupils) as “the consumer”, and this involved policies based on consumer choice, placing an emphasis on the information available in order to provide this choice, and that would be gained by the enforcement of a rigorous regulatory system in the form of Ofsted³.

This resulted in a far greater impetus for schools to engage governors from the business community, an element described in Thody’s 1994 study on school governors which describes, ‘An advice book for business community governors that, “schools need to run like companies with the governing bodies being boards of directors and the head teachers the managing directors” (Thody, 1994, p.22).

The professionalization of volunteers is not unique to school governing, but is a trend across the voluntary and public sector more broadly (Vignault & Fortin, 2014). These changes are linked both to a rise in neo liberal, market orientated ideologies within the European context and an, “emphasis on consumerism and responsiveness to ‘customers, which has provoked boards into rethinking the way in which they are linked to their service users” (Harris, 2001a, p.173). In England these changes have been particularly prevalent since the inception of the last Liberal Democrat/ Conservative

3 Ofsted – The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills is the regulatory body for education in England. Other areas of the UK have their own regulators.

Coalition Government (Ozga, Baxter, Clarke, Grek, & Lawn, 2013), which advanced the Academies Programme introduced under the previous New Labour government (a project which offered schools far greater financial and curricular freedoms than they had previously ‘enjoyed’) (Lupton & Thomson, 2015). As academies and free schools they were also freed from Local Education Authority Control (Gunter, 2011), and placed under stringent levels of control and regulation (Baxter & Clarke, 2013).

Since 2012, the performance of school governors has been monitored and evaluated in the same category of “leadership” as the head teacher and senior leadership team (Ofsted, 2014). This increased level of accountability – particularly in the realm of finance where governors are responsible for budgets that are often in excess of a million pounds-has meant that the work of governors is becoming increasingly professionalised (Baxter, 2015; Farrell, 2000). This professionalization is articulated in a number of ways: via the recruitment of governors for their professional skills – as an accountant, human resources professional or manager; via expectations of a higher standard of performance in terms of their ability to hold the head to account; via regular visits to the school and analysis of the vast amount of pupil data to evaluate school performance. Additional pressure has also been brought to bear by a number of high profile school governance failures that have been reported in the local and national press. These failures often highlight unprofessional governance as the reason behind school ‘failure’ (Baxter, 2014).

The study: research questions and methodology

Studies looking at the whole of the voluntary sector in the UK have identified that, “potential board members can be frightened off by a social policy environment which emphasises voluntary sector accountability and legal responsibilities.” The same report continues by remarking that, “People are now disinclined to be a board member not so much because of the accountability requirements and legal responsibilities, but because of the growing need for specialist expertise and skills.” (Rochester, Ellis Paine, & Howlett, 2012). Although the pressures brought to bear on this particular group of volunteers is substantial, research into volunteering has revealed that “Organisations can address negative experiences of volunteering by developing appropriate management practices: [broadly] it seems that continuation is more likely if volunteers are managed in an explicit, developmental, supportive and appreciated way” (Locke, Ellis, & Smith, 2003).

In order to investigate how governors are coping and managing within this very demanding climate, this study investigates what sources of information and support they are accessing in order to feel knowledgeable and confident in their role. What forms of information are governors using to make sense of their role? And what challenges are governors facing in terms of making sense of their role?

Volunteer working identities have been investigated by a number of researchers looking to find out what motivates volunteers to join an organisation and which factors encourage them to remain in post particularly in very difficult or demanding roles (see Yeung, 2004; Zimmeck & Rochester, 2011). A strong and effective working identity has been identified across the public sector as being a vital element in the retention and job satisfaction of those working as volunteers (Balduck, Van Rossem, & Buelens, 2010; Farrell, Johnston, & Twynam, 1998; Nakano, 2000). A key element in volunteer motivation and retention has been identified as the training and development they receive when they take on their role, along with ongoing forms of development as they continue in post (Musick & Wilson, 2003; Van Willigen, 2000). Another key factor in the retention of volunteers has been identified as the feeling of job satisfaction gained by accumulating levels of knowledge about the role and its function – a trait not confined to volunteers but one that is also seen to be influential in shaping and colouring professional identities too (see for example Singh, Vinnicombe, & James, 2006; Sørreide, 2007).

A number of researchers into working identities argue that developing a strong and effective working identity is vital in order for individuals to make sense of the working environment (Weik, 2001; Wenger, 1998). And that this ability to make sense of work is directly correlated with both job satisfaction and resilience: an ongoing sense of motivation when the going gets tough (Nias, 1981; Reeve, 1992). In the context of volunteering, these links are even more pronounced as intrinsic motivation is not complemented by extrinsic factors like payment or incentivisation (see for example Farrell et al., 1998; Hibbert, Piacentini, & Dajani, 2003). Large scale studies into school governance carried out by the University of Bath indicate that many governors come into the role for altruistic reasons - to make a difference, to give something back; others enter the role hoping to learn more about education and how it works (Balarin, Brammer, James, & McCormack, 2008; James, Brammer, Connolly et al., 2011a; James, Brammer, Connolly et al., 2012; James, Goodall, Howarth, & Knights, 2014). But wider studies into motivation and attrition argue that initial motivation is not enough to prevent attrition; that following from their initial motivation to become involved in a particular type of work, individuals must then create identities that make sense of environments that often, following immersion, are perceived to be hostile and frequently difficult (Nias 1981, Nakano, 2000).

Karl Weik's work (2001) explores the ways in which individuals make sense of organisations. He sees sense making as part of a trajectory that involves individuals not only making decisions, but also seeking justifications for decisions and forming strong commitments around them. These commitments grow to represent part of not only an individual's identity, but contribute to group working identity too. This model has been used effectively in work on third sector boards in order to see how boards monitoring and judgement processes develop and change, (Hough, McGregor-Lowndes., & Ryan, 2014). It has in other contexts been widely applied to examine recruitment and

retention in complex organisations (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), and to help to understand how people make decisions that may not always be appropriate in the context. Seeking knowledge about a role is a key element within the construction of a working role identity. This study builds on my own work into working identities and the role of knowledge in building confidence and feelings of competence in a role (Baxter, 2012a; Baxter & Hult, 2013; Baxter, 2012b). It also builds on an earlier study into the working identities of federation governors – governors responsible for governing more than one school (Baxter & Wise, 2013). It looks specifically at knowledge to investigate how governors are making sense of their role and what sources of information they are using in order to do this. The study also looks at some of the challenges that governors face in finding out about the role and its key elements and concludes with a discussion on the implications of this for school governing in England.

Governors in England are very difficult to research – there is no central register of governing bodies and no statistics on age; gender or ethnicity. In order to carry out this research a survey was designed using Survey Monkey- an online survey tool. The design included factors that have been used in other studies that seek to investigate working identities and the contribution of training and development to these identities. At the time of writing the survey has only been operational for four weeks. This paper draws from the results so far (205 governors) and from 25 qualitative interviews carried out both over the telephone and at the homes of school governors. The governors come from a variety of different schools and settings. Although the sample is very small, it worked as an effective precursor to the interviews, drawing out themes and areas that were then explored in more detail during the interview phase.

As the object of the study was to investigate the changing nature of governor identities geographical location, gender and ethnicity are not factors used to cut the data in this particular part of the study⁴. The quantitative data was provided by The Key School Governors⁵. It is based on an analysis of questions that governors ask on a governor support website. The data is drawn from 16000 school governors in England.

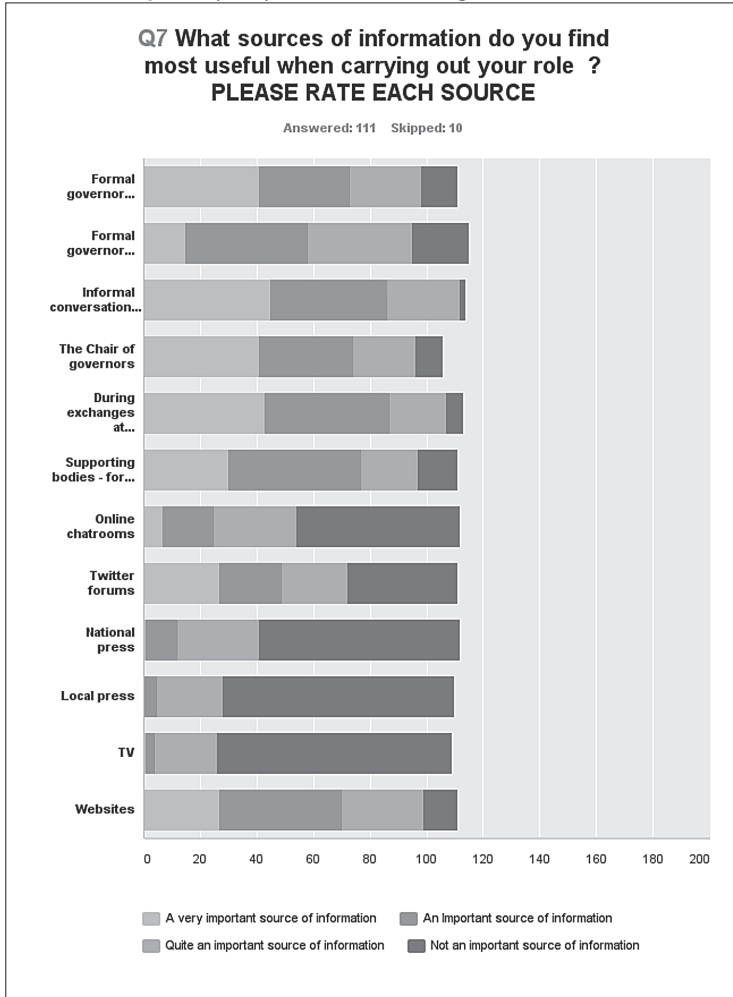
In terms of the qualitative interviews governors were self-selecting and interviewed either by phone or at their place of work (not governing), depending upon their choice. They were recruited via the online survey. The interviews lasted approximately one hour each and are semi structured, taking an approach that permits them to tell their stories about how they made sense of their work. This approach has proved to be successful in identity research in order for participants to place their own emphasis on areas which they feel to be important to them in narrativising personal accounts of sense making activities (Avis, 1999; Baxter, 2004; Baxter & Wise, 2013).

4 It should be noted that other papers emanating from this study will take these factors into account.

5 The Key School Governors is a support service for school governors in England – this data was provided by them and is used with their permission. (<https://schoolgovernors.thekeysupport.com/>).

Findings and discussion

The majority of governors responding to the questionnaire had been governors for between one and five years (40%), 27% had been governors for between five and ten



years, while 8.2% had been governing for less than a year. A surprisingly large number of respondents (23%) had been governors for over ten years. In terms of gender 68% of respondents are female with 31% of respondents declaring themselves to be male.

Figure 1

As illustrated in figure 1, governors find that informal conversations with other governors, conversations with the chair, exchanges at governing body meetings and formal governor training sessions to be their most valuable sources of information. The least important sources include the local press, television, the national press and online chatrooms. Examining the data in terms of online interactions it is clear that

some forms of online information sources are important; websites feature as the most important source, while twitter forums also look to be fairly important in terms of information gathering. The questionnaire breaks down the type of formal training being offered to governors into both Local Education Authority (LEA) Training and Training being offered by commercial companies. In the case of Academy's and free schools, training would normally be bought in from private contractors whereas in the case of LEA maintained schools this would normally be offered (bought in) from the LEA at a reduced rate.

The qualitative interviews offer deeper insights into what governor's gain from these particular forms of information gathering and development. This governor who had been in post for ten years talks about the challenge of achieving the right mind-set for school governing. They also tell me about the challenge that many governors have of taking a strategic rather than operational role - an issue raised in many larger surveys of school governing, and a criticism made by Ofsted in a number of their reports on school governance (see James, Brammer, Connolly et al., 2011b; ofsted, 2011):

"So I mean I think my understanding is only really getting up to speed by actually sort of initially throwing myself more into it, our local authority does a lot of briefing sessions for governors, and those have been the ones that have actually made me understand what the role is and the amount of things that actually we need to understand about the school and be able to challenge/support them on. I think most people come into this role thinking it is far more hands-on and practical than it is and I think it takes a long time to move out of the mind-set of okay we are struggling in maths, what can we do as governors when we come in, can we suggest a scheme, can we look for different ways of working? And it is none of those things, it is asking the right questions really." (Primary Governor 1)

Although information provided by local and national newspapers do not feature highly in the quantitative survey, the qualitative interviews reveal that it did have a part to play in providing general background and policy information on education, as this governor reports:

"I think for things that are coming up I find it a good start but I say I find it a good start for information. I would never take what they say as written, but then I might go, "Oh that looks really interesting, I wonder what they say about really?" and use that as a starting point to find, to look up, and I also belong to... a sort of a chairs' forum locally within our consortium." (Secondary governor 8 years' experience)

Media reporting on actual school governance is thought to be very poor with 30% of respondents feeling that the media either lack interest in reporting on school governance or are always ready to report negative or sensational stories on governance. Respondents think that neither was a valuable source of information.

A number of governors believe that mentoring is very helpful, not only in terms of imparting information but as a support and in some cases as a role model - particularly in the case of the chair. A number of them talk about the success and the guidance provided by the National Leaders of Governance Scheme. This is a scheme that is set up by The National College for Teaching and Leadership. The Scheme aims to support

chairs of governance and helps them to become more effective in their role (NCTL, 2015). This mentoring is described as invaluable by a number of governors as this experienced governor and chair reports:

“And I’ve, the lady that I’ve worked with in my, come out to me at my school a couple of years ago, and has kind of done like a, not an Ofsted, but a sit down and gone through things with me.” (Chair of Governors high school - 10 years’ experience)

Another reports how they had used the scheme to help with Ofsted inspections:

“So I’ve used her experience having, her having recently had Ofsted come out to me and [she] looked at what we’ve got and said ok right where will you go with this and then questions me. That was useful just to have that questioning by a mentor.” (Chair of Governors - 15 years’ experience)

Although a number of studies have revealed the head teacher to be very influential in helping novice governors, this did not come through in this study, even in the case of the less experienced governors, the chair was thought to be a more accessible source of information than the head teacher. The innovation by the National College occurred as a result of a number of reports which pinpointed the role of the chair as crucial to the working of an effective governing body (James, Brammer, et al., 2012; James et al., 2014), and succession planning (Sharma, Chrisman, & Chua, 2003); a growing concern, particularly in the case of governors responsible for governing large numbers of schools (Chapman, Lindsay, Muijs et al., 2010; Chapman, Muijs, & MacAllister, 2011; Lindsay, Muijs, Chapman, Arweck, & Goodall, 2007).

The second question included in this study was one relating to the particular skills, attributes and knowledge needed in order to be a good school governor. This is an important question as it also indicates what skills and knowledge governors feel to be more valued in a climate in which government is placing a great emphasis on recruitment of governors from the business sector through organisations and initiatives such as The Governors’ One Stop Shop. The responses to this question are illustrated in figure five below. This demonstrates that common sense and time for the role is very important for governors- the qualitative comments support this illustrating that the sheer quantity of information available to governors as part of their role, requires time and effort to understand. Given that much of this information is inaccessible to those without an education background, common sense is imperative in order to analyse this complex data from a ‘lay perspective’. Professional knowledge – the knowledge of a particular area for example: finance; human resources is thought to be important. This reflects the current emphasis to engage governors from business and the professions, with skills that are readily available for use within the governing body context. It is perhaps interesting given the government emphasis on schools as driven by an employability agenda (Wilkins, 2014).

Time is a key factor in the study - both in terms of having time for regular school visits and having time for the role. Having time for the role is considered to be the most important attribute for governors according to the questionnaire responses. It is also featured highly in the interviews as governors explain why governance takes up so much of their time:

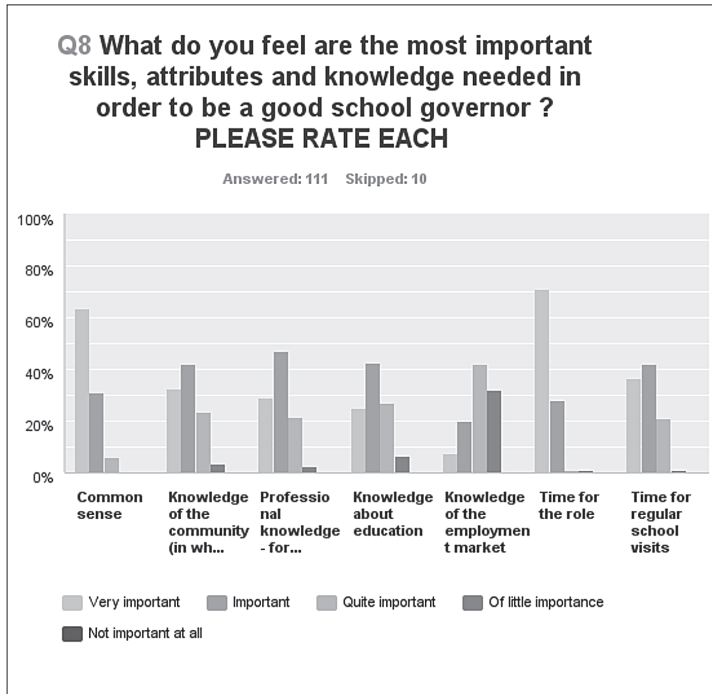


Figure 2

“I was having meetings sometimes at 7.30am in the morning at the local council trying to sort things out so fitting in around them, and yes, I was lucky that I was part-time. Definitely! Because I don’t know how I would have managed otherwise.” (Chair of Governors - ten years’ experience)

“And that’s where I think you can lose some very good governors especially if they don’t have the employers that give them the time to do it.” (Governor - 1 year experience)

“I think probably the danger, you know, the danger of asking for so much time is that you end up getting people that are retired and then they haven’t any idea about current education.” (Governor - 5 years’ experience)

Accountability is another key issue for governors - particularly in view of the more stringent 2012 Ofsted Framework and its update in 2014:

“I think it is accountability, it’s, you know, the more focus on governance, it’s, you know, the push to have a smaller governing body as well, isn’t there, and being more effective as a governor and that’s coming through more and more [and] you can’t just go on [the governing body] because you want to be a governor, you’ve got to really give that time, and that’s not, and that’s where sometimes you can lose good governors because they can’t give the time it takes for that level of accountability.” (Governor - 8 years of experience)

Some governors feel that the accountability is driving individuals away from the role as this governor reports:

“ I mean there are some people who are just leaving because they’ve got work and they say and this and that and the other, but it is daunting sometimes what you’ve got to do and what you got to try and keep in your head and know what you’re doing, especially when Ofsted turn up.” (Middle school governor - 4 years’ experience)

...while another feel that it is annoying to be held so accountable when you are doing the job in a volunteer capacity:

“ It’s a very daunting thing when you go up against Ofsted, you get questioned over what you’re doing when you’re not actually, and this isn’t my daytime job you know! ” (Governor, high school - 3 years of experience)

There is considerable disagreement around what attributes are most needed for governors in terms of professional knowledge *versus* common sense. The survey reveals that common sense is considered to be far more important than professional skills. But the interviews reveal different understandings of professional skills - some see common sense as a professional skill, whilst others feel that professional skills mean training in, for example: accountancy; human resources. This is an interesting factor that is worthy of further investigation.

This governor describes what they understand by being a professional governor:

“ So I think then it is the ability to understand the school, to understand the context in which it operates, and then be able to commit yourself to keeping up to date on the understanding of that, to be able to support and challenge that I think is the... is the most important thing. And then certainly your professional knowledge isn’t going to allow you to understand... is everybody... we have got a great drive for consistency within the school at the moment, and for people to be taught in the same way, with the same... in terms of behaviour, marking, learning, et cetera all the way through the school, and it is your common sense that will allow you to judge that, rather than any professional knowledge that you have.” (Governor - high school - 8 years of experience)

Other governors feel that it is good to have legal and financial professionals on board, but that time is an inhibiting factor as this governor tells me:

“I think it’s very important to try and get professionals, but it’s getting hold of professionals that have got the time to do it.” (Governor -high school -5 years of experience)

Many of the challenges being encountered by governors are inherent in responses given within the previous section: increasing levels of accountability; lack of time; and a role that is becoming ever more complex. But a key finding that emerges from the qualitative interviews is the way in which governing - unlike other forms of volunteering - is relatively occluded. This governor describes how this can prevent individuals from finding out about what is expected before taking on the role:

“Yeah, I think it’s funny, I was talking to one of my friends the other day about Ofsted and she sort of said to me, you know, I who are you as a parent, but as a governor, you know, who are you, you’re doing everything through the school...[and] I’ve known her for a long time. I wouldn’t even say my husband probably fully understands what a governor is [...] sort of the main perception you see of governors tends to be, if something’s gone wrong at a school they’ll be a chair of governors saying, “This has happened, or that’s happened,” or there’ll be a, you know, a governor sleeping with the head teacher or there’ll be some sort of financial implication.” (Governor - high school - 5 years of experience)

One governor reports how difficult it is to talk about being a governor:

“I think I find it hard to talk about what I do as a governor without sounding... arrogant I think the, because if I said I do this and this. Well ...you know how it would sound.” (Governor - infant school - 4 years of experience)

Moving onto other sources of information, the chair of the governing body clearly plays a very major part in not only sharing information and mentoring new governors but equally of steering the governing body in their duties and purpose. This has been identified as a positive element by a number of studies and certainly the chair is a central focus in terms of government policy, as evidenced by the earlier explanation of the National Leader of Governance scheme (James, Jones, Connolly et al., 2012; NCL, 2013). But some governors in this study reported the downside of this as this governor explained:

“Now we also had a very, very effective but a very protective chair of governors, who took on a lot of the burden themselves, for a long time, and it didn’t actually allow you to see the amount of work that was going on between the chair and the head.” (Governor –infant school- 3 years of experience)

Governors do see the hidden nature of their work as problematic, especially when trying to recruit new governors. This individual describe how the role could sound off putting depending on how you frame it:

“I think, yeah, they don’t think, you know, you, most of the roles you think about it, if you think, you don’t see the meetings and the good things, like, you know, talking to the staff after Ofsted, you know, that kind of really lovely buzz, but you have got the, “Oh yeah, I sit on the pupil discipline committee,” or, “I sit on the exclusions panel,” and you know, that sort of thing and everyone’s like, “Oh gosh I couldn’t do that to somebody.” (Governor - high school - 8 years of experience)

“I think it would be very hard to explain the role, if you do a full term of service I think it probably takes you most of that four years to get up to speed on what you are doing.” (Governor- high school - 2 years of experience)

This study set out to find out what sources of information are most useful to governors and what challenges in terms of information gathering were most pressing. The study reveals that governors are increasingly looking more widely for information about their role, that although the chair of governors and fellow governors are important, that online sources of information are gaining in importance. The study also reveals that governors use different types of information in order to feel equipped for their role - the use of more general news

about education; twitter opinion and website content are all used not only to find out hard facts, but equally to gauge opinion from other governors, working in very diverse contexts.

The study also uncovers some challenges for governors, these challenges related to the time needed to fulfil the role; the difficulty of keeping up to date with policy and related information and the challenges of being professional without being professionally trained. It also reveals mixed understandings of what is meant by the term professional in the context of school governing - an interesting finding which is worthy of further investigation.

In terms of theory the work has revealed that governors seek to make sense of their world by investigating particular areas of their work that they perceive to be important. These areas are related not only to operational aspects of their daily work but also respond to accountability demands by Ofsted. There was a certain amount of evidence to suggest that exploring governors in term of identity is a useful way of exploring their sensemaking activities. Unlike paid work, personal identity and how they feel about the role and their performance within it is likely to colour how they make sense of it. In this respect the study has revealed that they frame their sensemaking activities according to their sense of responsibility to the school: they are anxious to comply with the regulatory body – Ofsted, and are keen to know how best to do this. They are also keen to be recognised as professionals in a professional role and in many ways their sense making activities mirror those in the professional identity literature (Baxter, 2013a; Baxter, 2014; Baxter, 2013b).

The research also supported my previous research into professional identities (see Baxter 2013a; Baxter, 2014, Baxter, 2013b), identifying these volunteer identities as part of a trajectory that includes personal and professional elements. This is evidenced by the ways in which governors relate the sense making activities to their personal pursuit of job satisfaction, and the ways in which they feel that the knowledge that they seek is related to the extent to which they feel a sense of cognitive dissonance- the feeling that they need to know more about a particular subject in order to feel secure in this particular identity (Baxter, 2011; Sillince & Brown, 2009).

Analysing the responses in terms of governor identity and sense making, it would appear that whilst governors are proactive in seeking out information that will help them to sustain their motivation and identity, there are tensions around levels of accountability and the extent to which this demands that governors be as informed as paid professionals. The ideal of a “professional governor”, politically driven by school reforms that place profound emphasis on education as a market, is placing pressure upon the idea of governors as volunteers and may in the longer term affect recruitment and retention in this area. This research has revealed that it is important to use sense making – particularly the identity dimensions of this theory – in order to carry out further research into the impact of policy changes on the identities and agency of school governors.

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Abstract

Comment les *school governors* anglais donnent du sens à leur action : enjeux et sources d'information

ABSTRACT: Les évolutions du système éducatif anglais, menant à la fois à une plus grande autonomie financière et pédagogique des écoles et au développement de réseaux d'établissements et federation trusts ont fortement complexifié la gouvernance scolaire. A partir d'une série d'enquêtes sur les identités professionnelles dans le secteur public, cette étude analyse la manière dont les chefs d'établissements traduisent leur environnement et professionnalisent ainsi leur mission. Sur la base de données qualitatives issues de trente entretiens semi-directifs et d'une importante enquête quantitative, l'article se centre sur la multiplicité des sources d'information qu'ils mobilisent pour donner sens à leur action. L'analyse rend compte des enjeux auxquels ils doivent faire face, dans un contexte de réformes éducatives qui conduisent à reconfigurer l'éducation en un marché ; à plus long terme ces changements pourraient affecter leur recrutement et leur maintien en poste.

KEYWORDS: chef d'établissement scolaire, gestion d'établissement scolaire, développement des capacités professionnelles, information

Résumé long en français du texte

Making sense of school governing in England: Sources of information and challenges

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Créées sous Tony Blair en 2000, les *academies schools* sont des écoles indépendantes, financées sur fonds publics, gratuites pour les parents mais gérées par le privé et relevant du Ministère plutôt que du gouvernement local. En 2010, l'arrivée au pouvoir de la coalition conservatrice alliée aux Libéraux (gouvernement Cameron) accélère « l'académisation » scolaire en supprimant le droit de veto des autorités locales à la création de nouvelles *free schools*, en particulier dans les zones défavorisées. L'*academies act* voté en juillet 2010 par le Parlement britannique permet à toutes les écoles financées sur fonds publics de devenir des académies avec un degré d'autonomie différencié par exemple pour moduler le salaire des enseignants ou proposer un curriculum distinct du programme national. L'idée est reprise des *charter schools* nord-américaines ou encore des « lycées libres » suédois, lancés en 1992, établissements secondaires privés proposés au libre choix parental, subventionnés par des chèques éducation et bénéficiant d'une large liberté pédagogique. L'objectif consiste non pas tant à afficher une efficacité scolaire localement exemplaire, mais à améliorer le niveau scolaire moyen grâce à un marché scolaire plus diversifié et plus concurrentiel. Plus de 10 % des écoles secondaires publiques ont, à ce jour, obtenu le nouveau statut de *free school*. Quel que soit leur statut, les écoles sont gérées par des *governors*, qui nomment les enseignants et le principal, en déterminent l'allocation budgétaire et les grandes orientations pédagogiques. Dans le cas d'écoles sous contrôle d'une *Local Education Authority* (LEA), le conseil des *governors* est piloté par l'autorité locale mais inclut également des représentants des parents, des enseignants et des intérêts locaux. Depuis 2010, les LEAs peuvent continuer à nommer des *governors* aux conseils d'Académies, mais n'ont plus de voix déterminante. Responsables de budgets dépassant souvent le million de livres, les *governors* doivent répondre par ailleurs à un système réglementaire de plus en plus exigeant, dont le respect des normes est évalué par l'*Office for Standard in Education* (OFSTED). Alors que l'activité de *school governor* est originellement conçue comme relevant du bénévolat, ces pressions croissantes de l'environnement éducatif ont entraîné un processus de « professionnalisation », au sens où les *governors* sont aujourd'hui recrutés sur la base de qualifications

professionnelles de l'ordre de la gestion, de la finance ou des ressources humaines ; ils évaluent l'action des principaux en charge des établissements ; enfin ils doivent collecter nombre de données susceptibles d'éclairer leur évaluation lors des visites d'établissement régulières qu'ils entreprennent. En prenant appui sur les résultats de travaux précédents concernant la fabrication des identités professionnelles dans le secteur public et sur une enquête combinant entretiens semi-directifs auprès de trente gouverneurs et recueil de données quantitatives sur les trajectoires et les carrières, cet article examine les différentes sources d'information mobilisées par les *governors*, leur permettant à la fois de décoder les profils et les orientations des établissements et d'être partie prenante d'un travail plus large de réflexivité qui participe au processus de professionnalisation en cours.

L'article vise donc à illustrer comment les *governors* réceptionnent et interprètent des informations d'origines variées à travers leurs pratiques quotidiennes, et les utilisent à la fois pour comprendre le contexte scolaire des établissements et pour améliorer leurs propres compétences managériales. Bien que ne bénéficiant d'aucune reconnaissance statutaire, cette forme de « professionnalisation profane » correspond pourtant aux attentes des tutelles – LEA, Ministère, OFSTED.

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