Models of self-governance in schools: Australia and the United Kingdom

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Abstract
The final decade of the twentieth century saw a major shift to self-governance for schools in many countries, including the UK and Australia. This trend is underpinned by the assumption that greater autonomy will lead to improved educational outcomes. The impact of self-management on principals and schools is now well documented but much less attention has been given to the implications for governance, a significant omission as the process of decentralisation transfers responsibilities to governing bodies rather than school principals. Reviews the main issues of governance and illustrates them from the research in England and Wales and in Australia. It joins the debate about the appropriate balance between governance and management for governing bodies and examines the lay/professional interface in school governance. It assesses governors’ role as representatives of relevant stakeholders, while operational management is devolved to the principal. Caldwell and Spinks (1988, p. 5) “define a self-managing school as one for which there has been significant and consistent decentralisation to the school level of authority to make decisions related to the allocation of resources”. The case for self-governance is based on the assumption that decisions for individual units within the educational system should be made by people within those schools rather than by national or local politicians or officials. School governors and managers are able to tailor spending to the requirements of their pupils while national and local decision-makers, however well-intentioned, can only determine priorities on the basis of perceived national or local need (Bush, 1999, p. 242).

Most of the research and comment on self-management in the UK have focused on whether its anticipated benefits have been realised (Bush et al., 1993; Levacic, 1996; Thomas and Martin, 1996) and on the impact on principals and school managers (Bush, 1999). The collective view appears to be broadly favourable: Local management is supported by the majority of headteachers and few would wish to return to the previous system … the main impact of delegated budgeting on resource allocation decisions has been for schools to improve their physical environment and to vire money from operational services, which they have provided more cost-efficiently than the LEA, into direct support for teaching and learning (Levacic, 1995, p. 188).

The overall assessment of … school staff and governors is one of pleasure at their newfound freedom and a feeling that they are able to offer a better education for the pupils in their schools (Bush et al., 1993, p. 206).

These UK perspectives are consistent with much of the international evidence on self-management. An OECD synthesis of studies in nine countries gives a cautious welcome to self-management and concludes that it is likely to be beneficial: Greater autonomy in schools … [leads] to greater effectiveness through greater flexibility in and therefore better use of resources; to professional development selected at school level; to more knowledgeable teachers and parents, so to better financial decision; to whole school planning and implementation with priorities set on the basis of data about student [outcomes] and needs (quoted in Thomas and Martin, 1996, p. 28).

This finding supports the assumption underpinning self-management and suggests that, in many cases, the theoretical case for devolved funding has been borne out in practice. Certainly, as Levacic (1995, p. 188) points out, there is a clear political consensus to retain local management.

There is considerable diversity in the patterns of self-management in the eight school systems in Australia. The concept was born in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) in 1967 but the process was not complete until Queensland drafted its own legislation in 1998. The South Australian,
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Victorian and ACT systems all have mandatory, corporate bodies while the other states mostly have voluntary arrangements. In six of the eight systems, the bodies are called “school councils”.

While the impact of self-management on principals and staff is now well-documented, at least in England and Wales, there has been much less attention to those aspects of the reforms related to governance. As Pierson (1998) points out, the process of decentralisation transfers responsibilities to school governing bodies rather than to principals. This is also the case in Australia (Gamage, 1996a). McGinn and Pereira (1992) argue that decentralisation is used by governments to bolster their own position as well as to improve the quality of schooling:

Even when the state’s stated reason for changes in governance is that these will lead to improvement of the technical efficiency of the education system, the state is also concerned with enhancing its own position in society. When the state’s position is threatened, concern with technical efficiency will be lessened (McGinn and Pereira, 1992, p. 168).

McGinn and Pereira (1992) go on to suggest that governance policies may be used to regulate conflict between interest groups and to favour those groups which support the objectives of the state. Governing bodies fit these requirements well. They “incorporate” representatives of the main interest groups concerned with education in a locality and provide a forum for the local resolution of disagreements. This function is likely to be particularly valuable in post-apartheid South Africa where schools have previously been theatres of struggle. It transfers to school level many of the issues about priorities and resources which are so difficult to resolve in a society where the costs of transformation are likely to outpace the government’s ability to fund change (Bush et al., forthcoming).

In England and Wales, the transfer of powers to governing bodies can be seen as a wish to empower parents and business interests and to weaken teachers and the local education authorities (LEAs). This emphasis on “consumer” rather than “producer” interests is based on the market-led assumption that parents know what is best for their children and that teachers are more concerned with their own interests than those of the pupils and students. Most LEAs were controlled by the political opponents of the then Conservative government, so empowering governing bodies at their expense served political as well as educational objectives.

Research in Australia suggests that self-governance is widely welcomed. A survey of the representatives of teachers, parents, students and the local community, and of principals, at eight ACT schools in 1993 showed that 96.2 percent of participants perceived that the composition of school boards was good, very good or excellent (Gamage et al., 1995). There is also a positive response to self-governance in Victoria, as one primary school principal illustrates:

You have a variety of inputs . . . people with different backgrounds are giving input and opinions on the ways in which the council can operate, and the directions that the school can go . . . nine out of ten people at this school put their opinions quite forcefully and honestly and we tend to take those opinions and we come to a consensus decision about what to do (quoted in Gamage et al., 1996).

### Governance or management

The shift to self-governance for schools depends critically on the willingness of individuals to take on the position of governor or school council member and on their ability to fulfil the role successfully. The reforms have led in most countries to an increase in the number of people required to govern schools and in the scale and scope of responsibilities exercised by governing bodies. As governance is a voluntary activity, with no extrinsic rewards, there may be difficulties in recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of governors of an appropriate quality. Thomas (1992) links this issue to the wider emphasis on consumer sovereignty:

For a government that has laid such emphasis upon self-interest as the determining factor in shaping individual choice and behaviour, the paradox lies in its expectations that 300,000 private citizens will freely give their time to the government of local schools (Thomas, 1992, p. 327).

In Australia, there is some evidence of difficulty in recruiting parents to be school council members. An ACT primary school principal illustrates the problem by stating that “it has been a struggle to get people on the board”. Several principals in the Victorian and NSW systems have also stated that it is unusual for elections to be held for parental positions on school councils as the number of volunteers rarely exceeded the number of vacancies (Gamage, 1996a).

Remarkably, there has been little evidence of problems in recruiting people to become governors in the UK but there have been uncertainties in demarcating the responsibilities of governors and senior professional staff. The glib distinction between “governance” and “management” is inadequate to deal with the range of issues facing schools,
and governing bodies are usually left to determine their own ways of working. Thomasson (1997), a secondary school principal, illustrates the potential for confusion:

The development of a shared responsibility for the running of schools has not been all plain sailing; indeed the flotsam and jetsam of inappropriate, sometimes over-zealous, and frequently misguided concepts of governance and management are evident in those places and amongst those people whose responsibilities have been anything but shared, where the differences between governance and management have been ill-understood, and where some individuals have sought anything but the common good (Thomasson, 1997, p. 15).

Thomasson (1997, p. 15) goes on to state that “the headteacher is, uncompromisingly, the day-to-day executor of the principles engendered by the governing body of any school”, suggesting a clear difference between policy making and implementation. Increasingly, however, governors are also involved in operational management, through sub-committees and via their involvement in staff selection, for example. At best, the distinction between governance and management provides only a rough guide to the role of the governing body and success depends on good working relationships, particularly between the principal and the chair of governors, and on finding a balance which is comfortable for both governors and senior staff.

In Australia, the councils are empowered to formulate broader school policies and allocation of funding between competing claims based on priorities and policy directions determined by the council. The day-to-day management and the implementation of council decisions are left to the discretion of the head of the school. Research conducted in 99 schools in Victoria and ACT suggests that there have been no difficulties in differentiating governance and management (Gamage et al., 1995; Gamage et al., 1996). Commenting on how the school council functions in practice, a Victorian secondary college principal stated:

I think our council is very sensitive to its role. Its role is the general policy making, and it is the body that is finally responsible for what happens in the school. But, it draws a clear line between that role and a role that may be seen as interference. The school council does not become involved in the daily operations of the school or the implementation of its policies. It creates the policies and it is then very interested in the accountability, but it does not involve itself in the implementation (cited in Gamage et al., 1996, p. 33).

Research conducted in Victoria, the ACT and NSW suggests that the principals, teachers, students and the community members were happy with the models of school based management operated and consider them as effective models of school governance (Gamage, 1996b). A continuum may be postulated which relates to the level of activity of the governing body:

1. the “inactive” governing body, where governors fulfil only their minimum statutory role and delegate most of their responsibilities to their professional staff.
2. the “proactive” governing body, where governors want to be directly involved in all policy matters and may seek to influence operational management.

The position of each governing body along this continuum depends on the wishes and attitudes of both governors and the principal. The latter could choose to marginalise the governing body or seek to develop it so that it becomes a central part of the school’s governance and management framework. Given the importance of governing bodies in the reform process, development seems to be an essential requirement. “The decentralisation of authority is not likely to succeed unless capacity for governance exists or is developed at the local level” (McGinn and Pereira, 1982, p. 167). As Thomas (1992) suggests, the principals need to be proactive to increase the effectiveness of governing bodies:

A governing body may become a proper decision-making forum only if the head is prepared to sponsor that development. It will mean giving assistance to the governing body so that their knowledge and competence is increased and they become able to make their own well-informed decisions (Thomas, 1992, p. 332).

The promotion of effective practice also depends on the stance taken by the chair, as one school board chair from an ACT primary school illustrates:

I have taken very seriously the fact that the board is there for discussion and working on issues. We try very hard to ensure that board members have documents that they need, with plenty of time for reading. The principal and I meet very regularly … We have a very co-operative working relationship within the board and everybody feels they have a chance to have a say and to be involved in the decision making and at times we have held over issues till the next meeting (cited in Gamage, 1996b, p. 365).

The lay/professional interface

The composition of governing bodies is similar in most of the countries which have
moved towards self-governance. It may be summarised as follows:

- Parents.
- Teachers.
- Community representatives.
- The principal.

Some countries, including Australia, have also added representatives of non-teaching staff and of students.

In England and Wales, from 1999, parents have increased representation on governing boards, while parents are in the majority in the new governing bodies established in South Africa in 1998. Parents and community representatives comprise a majority in Australian school councils.

Governing bodies thus have both lay and professional members and one important task is to balance these interests in a way which meets the needs of the school:

Governing bodies are ... faced with reconciling the demands of professional and lay interests at two levels: first, within the governing body itself ... and, second, between the governing body as a whole and the school it governs. There is a potential for conflict at both levels, as these two interests have different, and sometimes opposing, aims, purposes and approaches to the issues they jointly face (Pascal, 1989, p. 88).

The balance of power between lay and professional members inevitably depends partly on local variables and interpersonal relationships but it may also be subject to legislative change. The shift to self-management in the UK not only increased the powers of governing bodies but also explicitly raised the profile of lay interests and particularly those of parents:

The enhanced role of governors ... inevitably led to a reappraisal of the relationship between professionals and laity in the management of schools ... They now enjoy substantial powers and professional attitudes are still adapting to the new reality (Bush, 1992, p. 22).

Now that lay interests constitute a majority, they clearly have the potential to exercise a decisive influence on school policy making. Making that potential a reality depends on the attitudes of all partners. Hanford (1992, p. 114) claims that parent governors regard themselves as “inferior”. “Parent governors are unsure of their role, even to the extent of questioning whether they have the same powers as other governors.”

Professionals have the capacity either to boost or damage the fragile confidence of parent governors. There is evidence that certain professional associations wish to reduce the power of lay governors. Nigel de Gruchy of the National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers, for example, uses the term “amateur” to deprecate the role of lay governors.

Commenting on a House of Commons Select Committee Report, he casts doubt on the value of governing bodies:

Without radical reform it is questionable whether governing bodies serve any useful purpose ... Thanks to this report, schools will continue to suffer many of the deficiencies of the current system. They will pay the price of [MPs] failing to recognise the fatuity of relying on the essentially amateur nature of school governor involvement (quoted in Carvel, 1999).

This antipathy to governing bodies was echoed in New South Wales in the 1970s and 1980s where the Teachers’ Federation vehemently opposed the establishment of school councils with community participation (Gamage, 1992).

An alternative approach is for principals and other professionals to aim at “breaking down the professional/amateur divide” (Thomasson, 1997, p. 16). This may involve the professionals acknowledging the legitimate role of lay governors and allowing themselves to be governed. In a research project conducted in 50 NSW schools (seven years after the establishment of school councils), the professional members were much happier with the mutual understanding, co-operation between the parties and the lay/professional interface at council operations. At the interviews that followed, most principals appreciated the cooperation and support they received from the community (Gamage, 1998).

Schools depend for their success on a strong reputation in their local communities. Building effective governing bodies, as a forum for community interests, is an essential part of the process of forging and enhancing a positive reputation for the school.

**Governors as representatives**

Members of governing bodies are elected as representatives of certain interests connected with the school. As these bodies have increased their powers through the shift to self-governance, they have also become more significant as a forum for debate and decision making. This shift has also changed the nature of the boundary between schools and their external environments. “Boundaries of schools are being widened through partnerships with parents, business and industry, social services and agencies in the local community” (Conle, 1997, p. 147).

Governing bodies operate at the periphery of the school, providing a formal link...
The participation of parents, teachers and community representatives, together with its legal responsibility for the school, makes the governing body the legitimate forum for reconciling external pressures and internal considerations (Bush, 1992, p. 30).

**Conclusion: towards a research agenda for self-governance**

The international trend towards self-managing schools has been based on the largely untested assumption that governors will come forward in sufficient numbers, and with the appropriate skills, to help schools in taking on a much wider range of management responsibilities. The reforms depend on a workable model of self-governance which enables professionals and lay governors to work together for the good of the school. Given the widespread adoption of self-governance as the vehicle for raising standards, and as a means of reconciling different interests, what is the evidence of its efficacy? Several questions arise which provide an agenda for comparative research on school self-governance.

1. **How are governors recruited and retained?**
   What processes are adopted to encourage potential governors, particularly parents, to put their names forward for consideration?
   In the event of an election to fill places, what are the processes leading to the election?

2. **How do governing bodies demarcate governance and management?**
   What statements exist to differentiate the proper role of the governing body from that of the principal?
To what extent is the distinction situational rather than a product of the legislation?

How does experience in different countries relate to the governing body continuum from “inactive” to “proactive”?

3 What are the distinctive roles of lay and professional governors?
Do governing bodies distinguish between lay and professional roles and, if so, how?
To what extent are lay governors involved in operational management?

4 How do governors represent their constituencies?
How, and to what extent, do governors present a particular perspective based on their category of membership?
What arrangements are made for governors to report back to their constituencies?

Governing bodies are an essential part of the architecture of self-managing schools but there is still only limited evidence in most countries, including Australia and the UK, of how they actually operate to manage the substantial additional responsibilities that have been placed upon them. The research agenda set out in this paper provides a framework for examining the work of governing bodies and for testing the assumption that self-governance provides the route to more effective schools.

References
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