

# Citizen Participation in Governance

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*The existence of an effective means of citizen participation within public service decision-making forums will be one of the biggest challenges for public managers in 2010. The establishment of systems which bring citizen representatives into the polity can provide unique opportunities for citizen inputs—one such system is the school governing body, made up of citizen, professional and political representatives. This article reports on an investigation into citizen participation within the governance of schools. It finds that while governing bodies provide the opportunity for citizen participation, citizens are not actively involved in school governance. A number of measures are recommended which may assist in enhancing the citizen governance role.*

As long ago as 1976, Higgins and Richardson predicted that:

*greater participation and consultation are now more widely accepted as a necessary element in decision-making at all levels and in all organizations, and it seems unlikely that the momentum behind the participation movement will slow down in the immediate future (1976, p. 27).*

Despite this claim, over 20 years later, the issue of public participation and the need to involve citizens in decision-making within public services continues to be of prime concern.

Citizen participation in the governance of public services is now firmly back on the public agenda in Britain. This may, in part, be due to the advent of New Labour ideas in government policy where notions of citizenship feature prominently. In the re-writing of the national curriculum in schools, for example, the Government has proposed introducing 'citizenship' as a key part of an individual's education.

Clarke and Newman (1997, p. 131) argue that 'the rediscovery of "community" has emerged in the context of the impoverishment of the public realm effected by New Right ideology and policy'. The authors argue that communitarianism is presented as the 'third way' in society, where it provides an 'answer to the problems created by the failures of the old (statist) left and the new (marketizing) right'.

Communitarianism recognizes the role and importance of individual citizens in participating in the policies pursued and delivered by government. Box's (1998) ideas on the emergence of the interest in community governance in America are also useful for placing British developments in context. Box (1998) identifies four eras of control in public organizations:

- Elite control.
- Democracy.
- Professionalism.
- Citizen governance.

In the era of citizen governance, Box (1998, p. 35) argues that the challenge is 'not only to achieve efficiency but to realize a community vision chosen and enacted by its residents'.

In Britain, citizen participation is being promoted in a number of services as a means to enhance user involvement, promote democratic legitimacy and develop the responsiveness of organizations to one of their key stakeholders. Taylor (1996, p. 59) asserts that if public services are 'to be more efficient and responsive, the ordinary citizen should be given the opportunity to manage and take responsibility for them'. The current theme of citizen involvement within public services, which will continue right into the first decade of the new millennium and beyond, is an immense challenge to the public manager. This is because, while citizens have been invited to become participants in the processes of governance, the extent to which they are actually active in their roles is questionable.

This article evaluates citizen involvement within one public service—education. While the participation of citizens is currently being promoted by the Government in a number of services as the alternative to both the statist left ideas and the marketizing right, communitarianism, or involving citizens, has featured prominently in education for some time. In their participation in governing bodies, citizens have had a significant position within school governance over a number of years, both as parents and as co-opted members. Focusing on school governing bodies, this article evaluates the effectiveness of citizen participation within

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governance.

### Citizenship

Citizenship, described as a 'strategically important idea in late 20th-century Western society' (Roche, 1992, p. 1), provides a new approach to welfare and public services in modern Britain. It is grounded in user involvement and addresses 'the paternalism and lack of accountability' which characterized post-war welfare (Lister, 1998, p. 47). Theoretically, citizenship builds on, and extends, the notion of consumer involvement in public services as citizens are a wider group than consumers (Clarke and Newman, 1997). Ranson (1988, p. 12) argues that:

*consumerism is not citizenship...A consumer expresses self-interest registered privately and with uncertain (though often malign) public consequences. A citizen, however, has a concern for the well-being of others as well as the health of society.*

*[Citizenship] denotes identity, status and dignity accorded to equal members of a society. Citizens are active participants in the community as well as in the polity, contributing to common welfare, to the economy's wealth production, and, most significantly, sharing in the rights and responsibilities of the polity (Ranson and Stewart, 1989, p. 14).*

Marshall (1963), outlines three elements of citizenship:

- Civil.
- Political.
- Social.

Civil citizenship relates to the liberty of the person, political is concerned with the freedom to vote and participate at a democratic level within society and social citizenship involves the rights of individuals to government support in the form of education and health care, for example. The participation of citizens in forums such as school governing bodies represents the promotion of the political form of citizenship.

It was the political conception of citizenship, outlined by Marshall (1963) in the late 1940s, which was challenged during the Thatcher years in Britain. The introduction of market-oriented mechanisms, such as charging for services and contracting out, for example, served to undermine the importance of democratically elected local authorities in making decisions about resource allocation (Walsh, 1995). Marquand (1992) maintains that while the promotion of market mechanisms encouraged citizens to become involved within public services, their participation was restricted to exercising 'exit' options associated with consumers of services in the market. In theory, exiting from one service and choosing another in the market place significantly empowers citizens (Glennister, 1992). In reality, however, the exercise of 'exit' provides limited

opportunities for citizen involvement. Glennister (1992) argues that the option of 'exit' can be costly to implement and requires the rebuilding of personal networks. In education, for example, Munn (1993) finds that moving children from school to school is not a practical consideration for most parents. Of greater importance for citizen empowerment than exit are Hirschman's (1970) two other elements: voice and loyalty. It is the incorporation of the voice and loyalty elements of citizen empowerment which provides the challenge to public managers. The operation of the 'voice' mechanism promotes the participation of citizens in school governance in positions which involve 'the well-being of the whole school and all the children in it, not the individual welfare of their own children' (O'Connor, 1994, p. 21). Loyalty is concerned with the promotion of both individual consumer rights and citizen rights (Farrell and Jones, 2000). Individual consumer loyalty can be enhanced, for example, where schools provide information for parents which meets their expectations and needs. In contrast, citizen loyalty is concerned with the development of ownership and allegiance in those citizens who participate in the governance of schools.

Active citizen participation in the polity is clearly part of promoting effective voice and loyalty. It is insufficient for citizens simply to be consulted—they must be actively involved in decision-making and take responsibility for this (Ranson and Stewart, 1989). Turner (1990, p. 209) draws a distinction between active and passive forms of citizenship. In the former, citizens are active political agents and in the latter, the citizen is the 'subject of an absolute authority' where their participation is not encouraged.

### Citizen Participation in School Governance

The participation of citizens in school governance was introduced in the Education Act 1980 which made it compulsory for governing bodies to include parental representation. This aspect of the legislation was significantly enhanced in the Education Act 1986 which introduced business community representatives on governing bodies. Their participation was widely perceived to have been influenced by the 'great debate' in education (Beckett *et al.*, 1991). This national discussion, led by James Callaghan in 1976, was concerned with ensuring that education should reflect the needs of those in the business community (Ball, 1990; Chitty, 1991).

Following the 1986 legislation, school governing bodies are a combination of appointed, elected and co-opted governors. Membership is determined by formula, based on pupil enrolment. A school governing body with an enrolment of between 300 and 599 pupils, for example, will be constituted as: four parents; four LEA nominees; two teachers; five co-opted members; and the headteacher (unless he/she decides not to be a governor). Of these, both parent and teacher

representatives are elected, parent governors by parents and teacher governors by teachers. LEA governors are appointed by the local authority and are usually, but not always, local political party councillors. Co-opted governors are selected and appointed by at least two-thirds of other governors. In making their selection about who to co-opt, governors are advised to 'make sure that their governing body reflects a balance of interests. They must make sure that the local business community is represented' (Welsh Office, 1998, p. 2). Of all the constituent groups represented on governing bodies, it is the citizen group, comprised of parents and co-opted members, who have numerical dominance.

The most recent legislation in education shifts the balance of governing body membership further towards citizen control. Since September 1999, all governing bodies are required to include an additional parent governor. In addition, the local authority education committee is also required to have parental representation. Both of these measures are driven by the notion that citizens should have greater inputs into decision-making forums and reflect similar developments in other areas of public policy.

The reform of school governing bodies in the 1986 Act was followed by the Education Act 1988, which was the start of a significant range of reforms aimed at empowering governing bodies in the management of individual schools. Governing bodies now have extensive powers in the admission and exclusion of pupils, budgetary responsibilities, personnel matters and the determination of headteacher salary levels. Their role is to operate at a strategic level within schools with the operational matters dealt with by the headteacher and school staff. Thomas (1992, p. 328) argues that the delegation of much of the responsibility for schools to governing bodies was driven by a perception that the 'producer interests' in education needed to be reformed. He argues that 'by decentralizing control over human and physical resources to the governing bodies of schools and colleges the reforms reduce the power of education administrators in local government and require headteachers and principals to work more closely with their governors'.

The empowerment of governing bodies brought the opportunity for citizens to have a major role in school decision-making. Ranson and Stewart (1989, p. 23) argue that the decentralization of powers and responsibilities to such local units 'enables diverse public perspectives to be expressed and consulted' and 'also to be drawn together to enable a public choice to be made and action taken in the common interest'. While decentralization of decision-making powers to local units is a core part of citizen participation, Higgins and Richardson (1976, p. 24) highlight that this in itself does not necessarily promote citizen participation. The authors argue that 'the central problem in securing greater participation is the insertion of influence at an appropriate

stage of the decision-making process, whether in the mobilization of support, in the process of deliberation, or in the final choice'. Citizens therefore have to feel that they have some level of influence in the decisions which are produced in policy forums.

Brehony (1994) outlines two perspectives on governing bodies. First, the participatory democracy perspective is where governing bodies provide the opportunity for citizens to be involved in decisions about the allocation of a major 'public good'. This perspective is similar to Deem *et al.*'s (1995, p. 42) idea that the involvement of citizens in school governing bodies 'potentially makes school governance a key arena for participation in the running of a major service and for the exercise of citizenship'. The second perspective, the new managerialist one, is much more focused on consumer control. Brehony (1994, p. 54) argues that here governing bodies 'are intended mainly to act in the name of consumers in order to regulate, discipline and conduct surveillance upon teachers, who are regarded as the producers of a public good'. The key difference in both of these approaches is the motivation of citizens in undertaking school governor responsibilities. In the former, citizen participation is associated with 'good citizens' and in the latter, their involvement is focused around notions of 'good consumers'. Both perspectives stress the need for active citizens and consumers in their participation, recognizing the knowledge and power which professional interests have within schools.

### Case Study

Taking both of Brehony's (1994) perspectives, this section of the article outlines the findings from interviews conducted with school governors on the participation of citizens on governing bodies. The interviews were conducted between February and June 1999. The views of 28 school governors within five schools within one south Wales local education authority area are reported. Recognizing that there are 'many ideological, social, political and educational interests' operating within governing bodies (Deem and Brehony, 1993, p. 343), an attempt was made to interview at least one governor from each constituency: headteacher, chair, teacher representatives, parents, LEAs and co-optees. However, while this was not always possible due to individual availability, a range of governors from each school has been interviewed. The breakdown of interviewees is as follows: five headteachers, four teachers, six LEA representatives, six parent and seven co-opted governors. The perceptions and attitudes of all of these governors to the participation of citizens in the governance of education are highlighted.

For the purposes of this evaluation, governors who are deemed to be citizen representatives are parents and co-opted governors. The other members, namely, headteachers, teachers and LEA governors are classified as those who

represent professional education interests. Although this article makes a distinction between citizen and professional governors, the separation is not always clear. This is because both parent and co-opted governors can be part of the education profession—both may be teachers within the school where they are a parent/co-opted governor, or teachers within another school locally, or they may be employed in an education organization. LEA governors may also be classified as citizen governors where they undertake governor duties outside their political party interests. Of those interviewed in this research, one of the parent governors was also a teacher within the school where she was a governor.

The key questions which are focused on in this article are:

- How do governors perceive the motivation of citizens undertaking the governor role?
- What contribution do they feel citizens make?
- How involved are citizens in school governance?

#### *Governors' Motivation*

Taking the first of these questions, the overwhelming view of all governors is that citizen governors undertake the governor role due to their interests in promoting a school's success. All governors feel that citizen governors provide a valuable link between school and community. Parent governors themselves undertake the role due to their interest in schooling and education which, the parents in this research felt, went beyond their own child's interests. As one parent governor argued, it 'is important for parents to be involved, it is about them getting an insight into school life'. Another said that parents 'have a tremendous vested interest in making the school successful'. Parents highlighted that they would be a school governor even if their child left the school. Evidence of this existed within the parent body where one parent, who had not been re-elected by parents, became a co-opted governor within the same school. The motivation of co-opted governors undertaking the governor role was very similar to parents. Typically, their motivation relates to an interest in education and their contribution is very much tied to their experience and expertise in the business community.

There are notable differences, however, in the perceptions of the professional group of governors about the motivation of co-opted and parent governors. A widely held view, expressed by one headteacher, was that parent governors were on the governing body because 'it is out of concern for their own child's interests', rather than a wider notion of contributing to the success of the school overall. Similarly, an LEA governor, while recognizing the value of having parent governors, also highlighted that 'sometimes they do act for their children too much, a "my boy" attitude'. This view contrasts sharply with governor perceptions of the motivation of co-

opted governors, who the headteacher argued, 'undertake the role due to their sense of civic responsibility and loyalty to the community'.

#### *Citizens' Contribution*

The second question under review concerns the contribution and inputs of citizens within governing bodies. Without exception, all governors welcomed the participation of citizens. Their involvement is viewed as beneficial to the successful governance of schools. Many citizen governors bring their experiences from the business community and their places of work into schools which, as one headteacher argued: 'makes an excellent contribution to the school'.

The contribution made by citizens was viewed differently by professional governors. Professional governors welcomed the contribution of co-opted governors on grounds of their expertise in an aspect of business, such as accounting or personnel matters. Many headteachers used this experience and recognized the value of co-optees. However, governors were less enthusiastic about the parent governor contribution. Once again, there was a perception that parent governors acted in the interests of their own children and supported school policies only where they would be personally beneficial.

#### *Citizen Involvement in School Governance*

The third area focused on in this article is the level of citizen involvement in school governance. In order to evaluate the extent to which citizens are active participants in school governing bodies, the level of governing body involvement in the preparation and presentation of documentation such as the School Development Plan (SDP) or the Annual Report for parents is a useful indicator. With the exception of one school, the level of governing body involvement in key school documents was low. Documents such as the SDP are prepared by headteachers in consultation with staff—one headteacher explained that 'it would not be appropriate for governors to write the SDP. Some of our governors are elderly, some are not professionals in education and they lack confidence'. The exclusion of governors on the basis that they are not professionals in education was also highlighted by another headteacher. He argued that 'I write the documents for the school and give these to the governors for approval. The governors here always accept the expert's opinion'. Similarly, another headteacher highlighted that the role of the governing body in her school was a traditional one in which 'the heads were the ones who did things in a school...governors come here and have tea and biscuits. They have a report from me and the minutes of the previous meeting. They go through the minutes. But everything gets passed and nothing gets questioned. Very rarely, and I could count on one hand the number of times that a governor has asked me a question about my head's report'.

It is interesting to examine the views of other

governors in these schools about their own involvement in the preparation of key documents. When asked about this, some agreed that 'the governors do see the SDP, but do not have a lot of input at the moment'. In contrast, other governors argued that they felt involved in school decision-making. One said that the headteacher writes school documentation, but 'only after consultation with the governing body'. Here it was felt that the ideas which went into key documents for the school were driven by the governors, rather than the headteacher. It is interesting, however, that in these schools where the governors felt involved, the headteachers of these schools highlighted that it was they who were in control and it was them who directed the governors into making particular decisions.

In the one school where the governing body do have a role in the preparation of school documentation, it is the committee system of the whole body which appears to be the significant element in promoting this. In the committees, governors have an opportunity to examine targets, question aspects of school policy and to devise plans for the forthcoming year. The headteacher recognized that the governor role is to 'help set the plan and work out the direction of the school with my guidance. My job is to set the overall vision of the school'. The other governors interviewed within this school highlighted their participation in the preparation of school documentation and felt that the committee system was an important element in encouraging their involvement.

Overall, on the basis of the evidence discussed, the extent to which citizen participation in governance is effective can be questioned. While legislatively empowered, to what extent can citizen involvement be classified as active or passive (Turner, 1990)? Are citizens achieving the citizenship status which has been ascribed to them (Pinker, 1971)? The governors interviewed in this study clearly have different views about the motivation and contribution of parent and co-opted governors. Parent governors are not being ascribed the status which co-opted governors have gained due to a perception that their motivation is wholly centred on their own children's interests. Only in specific cases where parent governors are also teachers in the governing body of their own school, or where they are teachers locally, was the 'useful contribution' of parent governors specifically identified.

The notable difference between parent and co-opted governors may relate to their appointment. Co-optees are likely to have an identifiable contribution as they have been individually selected by the governing body. It is likely that their expertise is closely linked to their employment situation and, on the basis of the background of the co-opted governors interviewed in this research, this is most likely to be a professional area of work. In contrast, parent

governors, who have been elected by parents, are less likely to have a professional background. It may be their availability or their willingness to undertake the role. In two of the schools, there were some problems in obtaining the specified number of parent governors on the governing body.

There are clearly significant differences in the perceptions of governors about the contribution of citizen governors. These undermine parent governors in undertaking their governor responsibilities. The level of governing body involvement in key areas was also focused on in the interviews. From these, in all but one of the schools, governing bodies are not involved at a high level in these important aspects, including developing vision and strategy for schools. Clearly, strategy is being developed by headteachers and endorsed by governing bodies. This results in headteachers and schools taking much of the responsibility for the management of schools—including both strategic and operational matters. It leads to questions not only about citizen involvement in governing bodies, but also about the purpose of governing bodies overall. Not only are citizens not involved, but neither are other governors in the strategic management of schools.

As outlined by Deem *et al.* (1995), governing bodies provide the opportunity for the promotion of active citizenship and participation. However, the extent to which governing bodies have enhanced either citizenship or participation is questionable. The participation of parent governors is undermined by other governors and their views are deemed to represent a personal perspective and therefore not taken seriously. While co-opted governors have a more significant role and their contribution is considered beneficial, their participation is also undermined by the significant role of headteachers in schools. Thody (1994, p. 214) highlights that the 'rationale for empowerment [of governing bodies] has been to move power away from the professionals' in education'. The extent to which this has occurred in practice must be questioned. While powers have theoretically been devolved from LEAs to school governing bodies, in reality, the locus of power appears to reside within schools, particularly with headteachers. Thus, although some governors in this research felt involved in decision-making, the headteachers of these schools denied this.

## Conclusion

The opportunity exists within governing bodies for the development of citizenship. The evidence presented here, however, does not support citizen involvement. Neither of Brehony's (1994) perspectives on governing bodies reflect the findings of this article. Governing bodies are not involved at a high level in decisions about what goes on within schools, refuting both the participatory democracy and new managerialist perspectives. From the evidence presented here,

citizen governors have a passive, rather than an active, role in governance.

The participation of citizens within governing bodies has important lessons for the extension of this initiative in other policy areas. It is apparent from the evidence on the role of parents that where citizens have a personal interest in governance, their credibility is threatened. From this perspective, it would be preferable for parent governors not to have children in the school where they are governors. Implementing this strategy, however, would present difficulties. For example, parents as members of other governing bodies may not have the same interests in school success. In fact, from Brehony's (1994) managerialist perspective, parents in this position would have an interest in another school's failure.

Parent governors therefore have an important role within the governing bodies where their children attend school. In seeking to improve their position, previous research has found that the absence of a feedback mechanism has resulted in parent governors not feeling accountable to other parents (Farrell and Law, 1999). It seems that the parent role in school governance is further limited by parental perceptions that they fail to represent other parents (Martin, 1996). The introduction of a feedback mechanism could have a positive effect on the parent role with likely positive implications for citizenship.

Effectively challenging professional interests within the governance of public services is an important component of any strategy to promote citizen participation. In essence, moving from the era of professionalism to that of citizen governance must involve shifting power from professionals to citizens (Box, 1998). This research has found that professionals continue to have a significant role in the governance of schools. Deem *et al.* (1995) also found that parents are on the periphery of decision-making, where professionals dominate. Parents, in particular, feel they lack expertise and experience to challenge professional interests. The public manager in 2010 needs to ensure that citizens are fully empowered. An important element of their empowerment will be information. Citizens need to have a range of information sources available to them, not just that which is provided by professionals.

The evidence above highlights that the adoption of a committee system within the decision-making forum can have a positive effect on participation. While all governing bodies are legislatively obliged to have a committee system, the operation of this in dispersing power amongst different governors appears variable. In the school where the committees take practical responsibility for aspects of school activity, individual members, including citizens are empowered. The committee system therefore is one mechanism for promoting more active citizenship and governance. Its adoption could offer a practical solution to the public manager in 2010 who wishes to promote citizen participation in governance.

The evidence presented here that the citizen role in school governance is not as active as it might be has clear implications for the enhancement of the citizen position within the governance of other public services. Putting citizens into policy-making forums is not sufficient to guarantee involvement and participation. The suggestions relating to the introduction of appropriate feedback mechanisms, information provision and the adoption of a committee system should be examined in order to improve the effectiveness of citizen governance. The shift from the era of professionalism to citizen governance will inevitably threaten the status quo within many public services. Making this shift, and empowering citizens as the 'third way', the public manager will face immense challenges, not just from professionals, but also from citizens themselves. Participation in governance will involve 'difficult' public policy choices for citizens, involving decisions around, for example, the closure of some services, and also much will be expected from the citizen in terms of time and resources. Citizens need to be satisfied with the level of their participation or they will become disaffected. If this occurs, the 'third way' may be considered to be an ideal which will be relegated to the history books. ■

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