The Construction of ‘Consensus’ in School Governing Body Meetings:

Paper presented at BERA Annual Conference 2011 by Helen Young

School governing bodies have considerable formal power in schools in England so how they make decisions is a significant area for study. This paper draws on qualitative research in one community primary school and on policy analysis. It uses models of deliberative democracy to explore how consensus is constructed in governing body meetings. It suggests that the premature construction of consensus has important implications as it can lead to both the exclusion of the perspectives of subordinated members and to a lack of exploration of alternatives to dominant discourses of education.

Keywords: democracy; school governing bodies; governance

Introduction

School governing bodies have considerable formal power in schools in England so how they make decisions is a significant area for study. In 2010, I conducted research into deliberative democracy through an ethnographic study of the governing body of a community primary school. In this paper, I have revisited the data to further explore a specific aspect that stood out for me; that of the construction of consensus. I was surprised by the extent to which the governing body was constructed as having one mind and one voice and decided to explore this further.

Consensus meant that decisions were made quickly and the apparent mood of the meeting was upbeat. However, I am concerned that the overvaluing of consensus can have two significant implications for governing bodies:

- Exclusion of the perspectives of subordinated members
- A lack of exploration of alternatives to dominant discourses of education
Furthermore, an ongoing practice of dissensus may make the governing body more resilient when there is a major disagreement.

The paper draws on qualitative research conducted in one inner London community primary school over two terms. It also includes an examination of policy documents. I am not suggesting that every governing body is entirely consensual on every issue but am exploring how consensus is constructed in one which is largely so. I will also consider how policy discourses set the stage for this. I am not attempting to generalise from one case but rather am looking at possible processes which can take place and lead to the premature construction of consensus.

Although the focus is on governing bodies, the issues which arise are not unique to them. Many of the processes described are standard in a range of board and council meetings. Their impact is potentially exacerbated in governing bodies because of their ambiguous role (Balarin, Brammer, James, & McCormack, 2008, p. 5) and because of the lack of recognition of the political nature of education. Education, which is inherently political, has long been widely perceived as fairly apolitical. However, it is now being further ‘depoliticised’, particularly through an effectiveness discourse. This apparent depoliticisation of the apolitical or lessening of the recognition of education’s political nature has important implications for social justice.

In this paper, I give some background on school governing bodies; raise some questions about democracy and consensus; set out the research strategy behind this paper; then set out six themes related to governing bodies and the construction of consensus which
are made up of the sub-themes which emerged from the analysis. The six themes are: decisions and voting; the common good of the school; politeness and social relations; perceived lack of confidence; collectivity in the minutes; and practical constraints.

**School governing bodies**

The extensive powers and duties of school governing bodies in England include: setting the budget, appointing the head and setting the school’s broad direction.

**Membership**

Governing bodies for community schools are required to have a membership of: staff governors elected by the staff; parent governors elected by the parents; community governors nominated by the governing body; and local authority governors nominated by the local authority (DCSF, 2010).

Their membership is often not representative of the school community which they serve. For example, in their study of schools in three disadvantaged areas, Dean et al found that ‘the membership of governing bodies bears little relationship to the composition of school populations nor, by implication, to the composition of local communities (Dean, Dyson, Gallannaugh, Howes, & Raffo, 2007, p. 21). Specifically, they found that membership was ‘skewed towards women, older people, and people from majority ethnic and professional backgrounds. This skewing was even more evident among the limited number of governors who were most active’ (Dean, et al., 2007, p. viii). This paper focuses on what happens within a governing body but it is important to bear in mind that the overall membership is already unrepresentative before issues of influence within the governing body are considered.
Corporate body

A governing body is a corporate body so has

a legal identity separate from that of its members… individual governors are generally
protected from personal liability as a result of the governing body’s decisions and
actions. Provided they act honestly, reasonably and in good faith, any liability will fall on
the governing body even if it has exceeded its powers, rather than on individual members
(DCSF, 2010, p. 11).

The way the requirement to act as a corporate body is presented in policy documents
may imply that, in their decision making, governors should suppress difference and/or not
allow for the development of difference. Although ultimately governors need to act as one
body which requires a tentative and temporary consensus, I argue that the processes for
reaching that point need to involve deliberation and expressions of difference. On the one
hand, governing bodies are made up of individuals who may well have differing educational
values and perspectives which they need to articulate. On the other, deliberation has an
educative role so, if there are no opportunities for the discussion of views, members are less
likely to formulate views about issues and are more likely to assume that there is no
alternative to the status quo.

The constitution of governing bodies emphasises governors’ relationships to their
fellow governors over their relationship to any external constituency or stakeholders.
Although parents and staff are voted for by parents and staff, they are there as representative
parents and staff rather than as parent or staff representatives. In other words, they have the
experience of being parents or member of staff but they are on the governing body as
individuals and are not expected to represent other parents or staff as a constituency. This
means they are not individually or directly accountable to those who voted for them. Once a
decision is made by the governing body, individuals must stand by this rather than
disassociate themselves from it. This can mean that individuals are divorced from a constituency which might encourage them to take a stronger stand on particular issues.

**Critical friend**

Central to the national context for this research is the government expectation that a governing body should act as a ‘critical friend’. Within the concept of critical friend, there could be some potential for challenges to consensus. The Guide to the Law states:

A good headteacher will discuss all the main aspects of school life with the governing body and will expect the governing body to both challenge and support the school. Acting as a “critical friend”, the governing body should offer support and constructive advice, but governors should not be deterred from questioning proposals and seeking further information to enable them to make sound decisions. The headteacher should give the governing body enough information to enable it to feel confident that both it and the headteacher are fulfilling their statutory responsibilities. (DCSF, 2010, p. 13)

As in other parts of this Guide, the relationship between the governors collectively and individually is unclear. The governing body as a whole should be a critical friend but it is not clear what role this gives individual governors. It might be consistent with the role of a corporate body acting as a critical friend to suggest that there is a need for unity *within* the governing body if it is to challenge all or part of the school on a particular issue. This applied, for example, in a North London school where the governors and the head were united in a dispute against staff about working hours (Moore, 2011).

With a similar tone to that in which ‘critical friend’ is described, Ofsted suggests that for effective governing bodies, ‘The questions they ask challenge assumptions and support effective decision-making’ (Ofsted, 2011, p. 5). This will be explored later in relation to the effectiveness discourse which underpins the idea of ‘The common good of the school’.
Democracy and consensus

The focus of this paper is on how consensus is constructed. However, a brief outline of some normative political theory provides sensitising analytic concepts and distinctions.

If governing bodies are to be understood as a place for local democratic engagement, deliberative democracy can provide an interesting theoretical basis for considering how they work. Governing bodies do not appear to be democratic in an aggregative or voting sense. It is, therefore, interesting to explore whether they might be democratic in a deliberative sense. Using this lens can draw attention to concrete practices and the operation of power.

Deliberative democracy can be described in opposition to an aggregative model of democracy. In the aggregative model, individuals’ preferences are seen as fixed in advance of any political process so the purpose of the process is to aggregate them. Conversely, according to a deliberative democracy model, individuals’ preferences may be altered by the political process. They do not just receive and choose between packages of policies from political elites, they are actively engaged in the creation of policies themselves. People learn more about the situation and come to understand how others are affected by a particular stance. Assumptions about both aims and how to achieve them are challenged. Engaging in dialogue and reflecting on their own and others’ reasons can lead to the transformation of their preferences.

The dual roots of deliberative democracy can be seen in Rawls and Habermas. Dryzek sets out the ways in which both Rawls and Habermas value consensus in their theories of democracy. For Rawls, ‘public reason is singular, and produces consensus’ (Dryzek, 2002, p. 15). For Habermas, ‘consensus remains the regulative ideal’ (p. 48) and, although he
recognizes plurality, ‘this is mainly in terms of obstacles on the road to consensus’ (p. 48). Dryzek (2002) and Young (2000) reject this emphasis on consensus and emphasise the recognition of difference and challenging of existing power relationships (Dryzek, 2002; Young, 2000). Their perspectives inform the approach to deliberative democracy behind this paper. Dryzek concludes that:

Consensus is by definition unanimous agreement not just on a course of action but also on the reasons for it… In a pluralistic world, consensus is unattainable, unnecessary and undesirable. More feasible and attractive are workable agreements in which participants agree on a course of action, but for different reasons. (p. 170).

Young suggests:

Dialogue participants open to and aiming for agreement must nevertheless acknowledge that conflict and disagreement are frequent, and not be frightened away from democratic practice by their emergence. Too strong a commitment to consensus as a common good can incline some or all to advocate removing difficult issues from discussion for the sake of agreement and preservation of the common good. (Young, 2000, p. 44)

A recognition of Dryzek’s and Young’s views in practice might mean that governors have a greater recognition that consensus will not always be obtained and that this is not somehow rude or negative. Difference might be explicitly valued by the aims, the individuals and the structures of the governing body. It might also mean that there is greater openness about people’s reasons for their perspectives.

Through this openness, deliberation itself is educative and transformative. People do not necessarily have fully formed views about topics such as education; their views are developed through deliberation. Deliberation is essential to the formation of perspectives. If there is no space for deliberation, perspectives often remain undeveloped. In other words, if
nothing is discussed, there is nothing to discuss. This can lead to the preservation of the status quo with its existing power relationships.

Mouffe summarises the understanding of democratic politics that informs this paper:

Instead of trying to erase the traces of power and exclusion, democratic politics requires bringing them to the fore, making them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation. The fact that this must be envisaged as an unending process should not be cause for despair, because the desire to reach a final destination can only lead to the elimination of the political and to the destruction of democracy. In a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism. (Mouffe, 1996, p. 255)

The themes which emerge from the empirical research below suggest ways in which ‘traces of power and exclusion’ can be hidden through the construction of consensus in governing bodies.

There are four key studies about school governing bodies and democracy. The first study, the Active Citizenship Study (Deem, Brehony, & Heath, 1995), was carried out some time ago but is particularly relevant as they question whether governors act as ‘state volunteers’, with a managerial role implementing government policy, or as ‘citizens’, who sometimes challenge these policies (p. 162). They conclude that ‘it is not acceptable for lay people to do the state’s work for it under the guise of semi-autonomous devolved management, which is falsely seen to empower schools, parents and the local community.’ (p. 162). The second, the Birmingham Study (Ranson et al, 2005), suggests that school governing has been ‘the largest democratic experiment in voluntary public participation’ It presents an ideal type when ‘the governing body takes overarching responsibility for the conduct and direction of the school. The head will be a strong professional leader of the governing body that acts as a corporate entity’ (2005, p. 363). This paper further explores the
implications of the idea of a corporate body and is also informed by Ranson’s work around
learning (Ranson, 2004) as learning and deliberation are closely related. The third, the Joseph
Rowntree Foundation study (Dean, et al., 2007), explores issues related to school governors
in areas of disadvantage, where it suggests the current volunteer model is most problematic. It
sets out three rationales for school governors: ‘Managerial’ (p. 12); ‘Localising’ and
‘Democratising’ (p. 13). The distinctions between these three rationales provide a valuable
starting point for the present study. The fourth, the Business in the Community study
(Balarin, et al., 2008), suggests that school governing is: ‘Overloaded’, ‘Overcomplicated’
and ‘Overlooked’ (p. 4). The study, like the current paper, emphasises the need for governors
to talk about ‘the kind of schools they want’ (p. 32). Balarin et al make a useful analysis of
tensions within school governing and list four: ‘support-challenge, representation-skill,
operational-strategic, managing-scrutiny’ (p. 36). These highlight the fine lines that
governors are expected to tread and provide useful lenses for looking at the practice of
governors in the study school.

These studies are all extremely valuable and have informed this paper. However, they
do not draw on deliberative democracy and do not particularly explore difference or the
construction of consensus within governing bodies.

**Research strategy**

To explore the construction of consensus, I examined policy texts and drew on
empirical research conducted in one community primary school, Thames School. This section
includes more background about both these sources then describes the analysis of the data.

**Policy texts**

It is unlikely that many governors read all the national policy documents which their
formal role might suggest they are required to read. If governors were to follow up on the
links in the 250 pages of *A guide to the law for school governors*, ‘an extremely conscientious new governor would have to digest nearly 5,000 pages of central government regulation and guidance.’ (LGA, 2010, p. 15). As Balarin et al say, ‘The role of governing bodies is described ambiguously in policies and regulations’ (Balarin, et al., 2008, p. 5). Since it is unclear how diverse governors interpret and make sense of their complex roles, it is not possible to make assertions or assumptions about what governors have or have not heard or read about their role. Therefore, the relationship between policy texts and governors’ sense of their role is complex. Policy should, therefore, be understood as both discourse and as text (Ball, 2006 [1993]). In discussing policy as discourse, discourse is understood as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak ... Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention" ((Foucault, 1977a,b, p. 49) in Ball, 2006 [1993], p. 48).

Amongst national policy texts, I have focused on the Guide to the Law (DCSF, 2010) as this is intended by government to be the main reference point for governors. However, as the latest edition was produced before the Coalition Government came to power, I have also considered the schools White Paper, ‘The Importance of Teaching’ (DfE, 2010) and ‘School Governance: Learning from the best’ (Ofsted, 2011).

**Thames School**

Thames school is a community primary school in inner London with approximately 450 pupils aged three to eleven. A range of minority ethnic groups are represented in the school but most pupils are from Bengali backgrounds. Most pupils speak English as an additional language and a much higher proportion than average are eligible for free school meals. There are a high number of pupils arriving in years other than nursery and reception. Access was a key factor in choosing it as a school to study. In its 2009 Ofsted report¹, Thames School was rated ‘Good’ overall. This Ofsted report says, ‘Governors have a good
understanding and involvement in shaping the aims, vision and key areas for improvement in the school.’ (Ofsted, 2009, p.8). The membership of the governing body is quite representative of the school community but not entirely so and those who are most active are the least representative. The head is conscious that some people speak much more than others and tries hard to address this.

I conducted discourse analysis of meeting agendas and minutes for a one year period. I observed full and sub-committee meetings over two terms. Finally, I interviewed governors. The governing body has eighteen governors (although one was absent for the whole research period). I had informal discussions with most of them and conducted hour long semi-structured interviews with six governors: Heather, the head; Colin, a community governor and the chair; Laith, a local authority governor; Parmida, a parent governor; Trish, a teacher; and Clare, a community governor. In selecting the governors to interview formally, my criteria was to interview the headteacher and chair of governors then to select four further governors, one of each type of governor (ie: staff, parent, Local Authority and community) and with a variation in the ethnicity and gender of those interviewed. Decisions about the selection were also partially determined by the role governors took in the first observed full governing body meeting, for example, I chose one who was vocal and one who was less so. Pseudonyms were used with initials that reflected the type of governor to help the reader to identify governors of each type.

Analysis of data
I initially analysed the interviews; observations; minutes and agendas; and policy texts separately. This initial analysis was broadly inductive but guided by the broad question of ‘In what ways do governing body meetings in one primary school operate as deliberative forums where a range of voices and perspectives are valued?’ and by experience based expectations
As stated earlier, I understand policy as text and as discourse (Ball, 2006 [1993]). Therefore, in addition to content analysis of policy texts and meeting agendas and minutes, I used a power/knowledge approach to discourse analysis drawing on Foucault. I drew on elements of Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) as he sets out clear procedures which are very valuable for highlighting aspects of what texts do. However, I approach Fairclough’s approach ‘with caution’ (Pennycook, 1994, p. 133) as his epistemological starting point is different. Unlike Fairclough, I am not suggesting that there is ‘a "real" world that is obfuscated by ideology’ (Pennycook, 1994, p. 125).

The above led to the generation of a large number of sub-themes. I categorised these under the themes below around ways in which consensus is constructed. I then revisited each type of data to explore the specific themes further.

**Themes**

The analysis of the data generated led to six main themes which are explored below.

**Decisions and voting**

This paper is not following the pluralists’ assumption that conflict can always be seen. As Lukes says of their approach, ‘this is to ignore the crucial point that the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevents such conflict from arising in the first place’ (Lukes, 2005, p. 27). The main way in which this happens is agenda setting. This is fairly straightforward.
At Thames School, the formal cycle of agenda items (set by the clerk’s company but based on the local authority guidance) is incredibly influential. It focuses meetings on managerial rather than visionary topics. The head and chair are responsible for preparing the agenda and I was told that nobody adds items in advance. Furthermore, I observed that people did not introduce items during meetings.

However, in order to explore how consensus is constructed, this section is focused on how decisions are made about issues once they are on the agenda.

At Thames School, interviewees referred to decision making in general terms but found it hard to think of specific examples of actual decisions that had been taken. In other words, they are seeing themselves as decision makers but, on reflection, are finding that decisions do not really arise. It seems that early consensus pre-empts discussion and explicit decision making. Furthermore, as Trish said, ‘I do feel the majority of the meetings are information giving’. There were few visibly contentious issues raised while I was there. The chair, Colin, told me that ‘possibly the most contentious thing has been whether to keep the school open for Eid’ (Colin). This had occurred over a year earlier. Others referred to a debate which had taken place about Sex and Relationships Education. Both of these are issues which are often presented as controversial in wider society, for example, through the media, rather than issues which are particular to education. Heather said that sex education had been discussed within local mosques that summer. The main issues which I heard discussions about in the meetings were carparking and uniform. While I was there, I did not hear about contentious issues that were primarily educational or framed in terms of learning.

With regard to voting, the Guide to the Law states:
Every question to be decided at a governing body meeting must be determined by a majority of votes of those governors present and voting. If there is an equal number of votes, the chair (or the person acting as chair provided that they are a governor) has a second, or casting vote. (DCSF, 2010, p. 19)

No votes were held at Thames School in the two terms that I was there. Laith who had been a local authority governor for about 10 years said ‘well I since I’ve been there, there’s not been a vote for a governing body to agree on things so it’s consensual’ (Laith). This led me to wonder whether a vote would be seen as a failure and a symptom of bad will within a governing body.

According to the Guide to the Law, a ‘Resolution’ is ‘A proposal made formally at a meeting that has been voted on and agreed’ (DCSF, 2010, p. 232). The minutes of Thames state ‘RESOLVED’ after many items in the minutes although an actual vote has not been held. In other words, there is a voting mentality but there are no votes. The way to dissent is to say ‘I disagree’ just as everyone is nodding something through. This is quite a hard thing to do. A parent governor told me ‘No I think we should say it but we don’t speak up. We don’t say it. I mean as parents. I mean if there’s something if we’re not happy about, we’re not saying it’ (Parmida). She gave examples around the amount of homework and achievement certificates.

Lukes suggests, ‘To assume the absence of grievance equals genuine consensus is simply to rule out the possibility of false or manipulated consensus by definitional fiat.’ (Lukes, 2005, p. 28). Greater deliberation can bring such issues to the fore. Voting suggests that the dimensions of any issue are agreed and one group wants one thing and one group wants something apparently opposite. In a deliberative model, deliberation can ‘multiply
dimensions and options’ (Dryzek, 2002, p. 41) which may lead to a creative response, if only through a temporary and particular consensus.

Most deliberative democracy theorists suggest that models of deliberative democracy must share with models of aggregative democracy the assumption that ‘voting is the means of making decisions when consensus is not possible or too costly to achieve’ (Young, 2000, p. 18). However, there may be an issue with the way governing bodies are constructed as somewhere between aggregative and deliberative models of democracy which leads to the worst of both worlds. The emphasis on voting in the Guide to the Law suggests an aggregative model. Voting is rarely used but the understanding of decision making seems to be aggregative rather than deliberative so that deliberation and dissensus can be seen pathologically rather than valued.

In summary, preemptive consensus is constructed through not raising issues as potential decisions and through the threat of voting in a context where voting is seen as a last resort.

**The common good of the school**

The literature and my empirical research suggest that governing bodies often act as supporters’ clubs. In other words,

most governing bodies … proceed through consensus in pursuit of some notion of the common interest of the school… It was important, we were told, that governors were able to work with each other and with the head, in order to “get things done” (Dean, et al., 2007, pp. 53-54)

In the mid 1990s, Deem et al questioned whether governors act as ‘state volunteers’, with a managerial role implementing government policy, or as ‘citizens’, who sometimes
challenge these policies (Deem, et al., 1995, p. 162). This question has been central in the research behind this paper. The notion of an uncontroversial common good and the emphasis on a managerial role are symptoms of an effectiveness discourse rather than a democratic discourse.

Effectiveness discourse in education tend to suggest that that the aims of education are clear. It suggests that if schools are ‘good’ in one particular sense, all pupils (and society) will benefit. This understanding is disputed by most sociology of education research (e.g. Ball, 2008). A depoliticised ‘effectiveness’ discourse hides power and exclusion.

Effectiveness discourse can be seen in Ofsted’s report, ‘School governance: Learning from the best’. The ‘best’ in the title slips into meaning ‘effective’ so ‘The aim of this small-scale report is to help all governing bodies to become excellent by showcasing examples of highly effective governance that is contributing to improved outcomes’ (Ofsted, 2011, p. 1) and the core of the report is ‘Key characteristics of effective governing bodies’. ‘Effective’ appears 55 times in this 33 page report. The emphasis in the report is on ‘information’ (this word appears 66 times) which implies value free knowledge. There appears to be an assumption that with the right information, the governing body will agree on the ‘right’ choice which is for the common good. There are hints of dissensus in phrases such as ‘different perspective’ and ‘challenge assumptions’ (p. 5) but throughout the report, there is a suggestion that once the relevant information is gathered, the question of what to do will not be problematic and there will not be outstanding differences of perspective or values. This hegemonic common sense reduces education to a technical matter rather than an inherently value laden practice. It appears to depoliticise the apolitical. Deliberative democracy, on the
other hand, has the potential to be educative and enable people to reflect on and develop their thinking.

Ofsted suggests that for effective governing bodies, ‘The questions they ask challenge assumptions and support effective decision-making’ (Ofsted, 2011, p. 5). This suggests that questioning on a technical level is to be encouraged. It does not suggest the type of questioning of aims that Deem et al propose that citizens engage in (Deem, et al., 1995).

The effectiveness discourse is also reflected in the policy shift towards a small governing body with ‘skills’. Ofsted’s report can be seen as ambivalent about inclusiveness in the workings of governing bodies. On the one hand it states that ‘Effective governing bodies are driven by a core of key governors’ on the other it states that for ‘efficient working … governors, particularly those who were new, felt that their views were valued equally’ (Ofsted, 2011, p. 13). However, the Government’s schools White Paper states that they ‘will legislate in the forthcoming Education Bill so that all schools can establish smaller governing bodies with appointments primarily focused on skills’ (DfE, 2010, p. 71, para 6.30). The valuing of a small group of people with ‘skills’ implies that there is no need for a range of perspectives and that dimensions such as class, gender and ethnicity are not significant. It suggests that there is one common good and a small group with the appropriate skills can discern what this is. Legislation is being used here to reinforce practice based on an effectiveness discourse.

The assumption that there is one ‘common good’ can position difference as against the good of the school. Recognition of provisional ideas of a common good can be needed in
order to act but this does not mean that a permanent and all encompassing idea of the common good in a governing body is beneficial to a school.

In summary, consensus is constructed by the effectiveness discourse and the discourse of one common good for the school which can imply that dissent would be against the common good of the school. This not only means some voices are not heard but mitigates against the collective exploration of alternative ideas that individuals may not have come to the meeting with but which might have emerged from more creative dialogue.

**Politeness and social relations**

Interviewees seemed to associate disagreement with unpleasantness. This is in direct opposition to Young’s perspective, she says, ‘I aim to challenge an identification of reasonable open public debate with polite, orderly, dispassionate, gentlemanly argument’ (Young, 2000, p. 49). A range of modes of communication are needed and the privileging of particular forms can lead to ‘internal exclusion’ (Young, 2000). Governing body meetings at Thames School do not appear as an ‘open context’ (Young, 2000, p. 40) or as ‘expansive … including unruly and contentious communication from the margins’ (Dryzek, 2002, pp. v-vi).

Collectivity and consensus were valued highly at Thames School. For example, Laith says ‘There’s not been an issue of conflict of interests. We’ve done things collectively.’ He had missed the meeting where the head, Heather, mentioned the national SATs boycott but asserted, ‘there would have been a consensus if it was discussed at the group’.

Parmida, a parent governor, talked about both politeness and confidence:
You don’t feel like saying something because they’re already decided and you feel rude to interrupt them and say no can you stop or I’ve got an idea. So you feel that maybe your idea’s not good enough or maybe it’s a silly idea so you feel like maybe you shouldn’t say something. After you go from the meeting you feel like ‘oh why didn’t I say this’ or that. But you don’t feel. I don’t feel comfortable saying oh I have something to say about this matter. I feel like it’s just it’s just two or three people and they decide on something. (Parmida)

I understood that Colin or Heather sometimes have a quiet word with people outside the meeting to smooth the way. Trish, Clare and Heather valued the smoothness promoted by Colin’s chairing. This might be understood as a valuing of style over substance.

In summary, consensus is constructed through the valuing of smoothness which can imply that dissent is rude.

**Perceived lack of confidence**

Heather recognised the lack of difference demonstrated in meetings and said, ‘I still think we’re quite cagey about expressing difference because of the confidence to speak in the public space if you like’ (Heather). Other interviewees also referred to the confidence of some governors as an issue. Confidence may partly appear to be an individual attribute but there are significant social aspects to it, including and beyond issues of class, gender and ethnicity.

As mentioned earlier, consensus is assumed in Thames governing body unless dissent is made explicit. What may appear as individual lack of confidence to challenge a consensus cannot necessarily be taken to be so and may instead be due to the incompatibility of subaltern discourses and those of the governing body. Although class was not explicitly
mentioned at Thames School, there was a class divide which was referred to in different terms. Heather commented on ‘the professionals’ and ‘the parents’, saying ‘that’s how they kind of the divide sits at the moment. It does look like that doesn’t it?’ Although there were a couple of exceptions to that divide, the divide felt present in the meetings. It was particularly salient in my interview with Parmida. As a working class Bengali mother, she talked in terms of ‘us and them’ throughout. She did not see herself as a full governor with a sense of agency, to the extent that she thought maybe ‘they’ should tell parents who the parent governors are. She describes the governing body as ‘they’ throughout and told me ‘they’ make decisions. Confidence can be context specific and can be increased by increasing the means of communication which are recognised. Young argues, ‘political inclusion specifically requires openness to a plurality of modes of communication’ (2000, p. 12).

Not being alone can be a significant element of confidence. At the level of social psychology, it is suggested that having an ally can help individuals to dissent (Asch, 1956). From a political theory perspective, having groups of people discuss and develop their views collectively as a counterpublic can help them to speak confidently in a wider public sphere (Fraser, 1997). Individuals with similar perspectives can formulate their thoughts and develop tentative positions as a small group in advance of meeting with a wider, more diverse group. Fraser suggests that a recognition of multiple publics, such as these, rather than an assumption of the singular public helps ‘expand discursive space’ (Fraser, 1997, p. 82). Further research is needed as to whether counterpublics allow groups such as parents groups to act as a ‘way in’ (Vincent, 2000, p. 18) to participation in governing bodies. This possibility is not straightforward in the context of governing bodies due to their constitution, according to which, staff and parents are there as representative staff or parents rather than
staff or parent representatives. Other types of governors are even further from being associated with a particular constituency.

In summary, the privileging of particular ways of speaking and the absence of counterpublics such as parents’ groups which feed in to the governing body can make it hard for members to challenge consensus. This issue needs to be understood as more than an internal lack of confidence on the part of certain governors, even if that is also a factor.

**Collectivity in the minutes**

Where differences, debate, questions and challenge do occur, they do not appear in the minutes. An example of this is the discussion of Sex and Relationships Education in July 2009 (before the research period). Three interviewees mentioned this without any prompting from me as a rare topic that had been controversial. In the minutes of that meeting, the schools’ position is set out and the item ends with ‘Discussion RECEIVED’. It may be that not recording challenges in minutes constructs an idea of unanimity among readers of them. Discourse analysis of the minutes suggests they construct collectivity in areas where it is not legally required. By ‘collectivity’, I mean that the governing body is presented as one body with one mind and one voice. This is largely done through the use of the passive tense, as in ‘it was noted’ (Feb 2010) rather than ‘the head reported’; through rarely naming individuals; and through describing the chair’s actions as having being done by all governors as in ‘governors welcomed’, ‘governors were pleased’ and ‘governors… looked forward’ (Feb 2010). Similar sentence constructions and phrases were found in the other minutes dating from Sept 2009. To the extent that the members of the governing body read past minutes in this way, this construction of collectivity greatly reduces expectations of and possibilities for deliberative democracy around different perspectives. It seems that by constructing the
governing body as having one mind and one voice, the minutes are limiting members’ sense of themselves as being able to articulate difference and challenges to apparent consensus.

With reference to the minutes, Parmida said, ‘it should … just say a couple of people have decided instead of the whole body decided heh’ (Parmida). This suggests a lack of full recognition of the unspoken rule that if you do not explicitly disagree, you are seen to have agreed.

In summary, the minutes do not record dissensus and through this they construct consensus as the norm.

**Practical constraints**

As mentioned, there are a lot of requirements on governors (DCSF, 2010).

Time pressure was a major factor in meetings. Colin, the chair, raised it as an issue in our interview and I observed this in the meetings. Colin suggests time is the main reason that people do not add agenda items and said, ‘I think sorry I think it’s my responsibility to get through it as quickly as possible but I’m always aware that you’re actively flushing over things that erm might otherwise be discussed a little bit more aggressively.’ (Colin). This attitude is very evident in the meetings themselves where items are moved on very fast. Colin has a charming way of saying ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ as a way to signal the end of a discussion.

There are a total of three hours of curriculum committee meetings per year. The 25 minute discussion in the July curriculum committee on the behaviour policy was the closest I saw to a model of deliberation. It stood out for me as there had not been many other discussions like this. Ideas went back and forth and were enriched by a range of
contributions. The power of dialogue to create ideas that no one individual could was evident. This highlighted the importance of time for deliberation. It reinforced the idea that if some statutory duties were removed from governors, they may have more time to deliberate about ‘the kind of school they want’ (Balarin, et al., 2008, p. 64).

In summary, dissensus takes time and makes processes messy. The need for speed and smoothness promotes consensus.

**Conclusion**

Although consensus mostly worked in the head’s interest, none of the above is to suggest any insidious intent by the head or other governors. For example, the head spoke to me at length about how she tried to encourage greater parental engagement within the governing body including around issues that were more education focused than the recurring discussions around car parking and school uniform. Despite this, consensus was constructed quite strongly in the governing body.

This paper has drawn on policy analysis and qualitative research at Thames School in an attempt to explore *how* this happens. It has outlined six themes related to this construction of consensus: decisions and voting; the common good of the school; politeness and social relations; perceived lack of confidence; collectivity in the minutes; and practical constraints.

As suggested in the introduction, the premature construction of consensus can have at least two problematic implications. Firstly, it can lead to the exclusion of the perspectives of subordinated members. This is inextricably linked with the second implication which is that there can be a lack of exploration of alternatives to dominant discourses of education. Deliberative democracy foregrounds a recognition that people do not necessarily come to a
forum with fully formed views on any particular topic. Where there is limited debate and
discussion, not only are the views that people do have not aired but there is no opportunity to
explore possibilities and create new understandings and approaches. These issues are largely
related to the way governing bodies work rather than to the individual characteristics of
particular governors. This limiting of discussion of, not only how positive educational
outcomes might be achieved, but of what positive educational processes and outcomes might
actually be has important social justice implications for the educational experience of pupils.

The construction of consensus operates in a number of ways and is part of a wider
discourse of education as a technical rather than a value laden issue. The use of theories of
deliberative democracy in this paper has helped to suggest ways in which 'traces of power
and exclusion’ (Mouffe, 1996, p. 255) can be hidden through the construction of consensus in
governing bodies. This is a rich context for further exploration.

Note
1. This report does not appear in the bibliography in order to preserve the anonymity of the
school.
2. Some school governing bodies use clerks employed by the local authority but Thames
School uses a clerk employed by a clerking company.

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