Introduction

As a governor myself, and as a researcher in education, this paper is an ideal opportunity to bring both aspects of my working life together. It has seemed to me that recently governors are being asked to work harder than ever under the Coalition Government's policy agenda. This was amplified for me in July 2012, when the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, made a speech where he noted several, contentious points about governors as ‘Local worthies who see being a governor as a badge of status not a job of work.’, who hold meetings that ‘ramble on about peripheral issues, influenced by fads and anecdote, not facts and analysis.’, and above all have ‘A failure to be rigorous about performance. A failure to challenge heads forensically and also, when heads are doing a good job, support them authoritatively.’ At the same time, in various high profile cases, such as that of Downhills school, local, volunteer governors have been removed to make way for state appointed nominees This is in stark contrast to other government rhetoric which seeks to highlight the legal and social responsibilities of governors, and the role of the 'Big Society' in delivering public services and enhancing public engagement.

I am interested in understanding more about what motivates members of the public, parents and lay people to become involved in this way. A particularly significant issue in the present policy climate is that the whole role of altruism and vocation is frequently overlooked in relation to what governors do. It is my experience that governors are involved because they care passionately about the children/pupils, about education, and about the good of society as a whole. Without their continued and sustained involvement, schools would look very different, or at least not one that would be recognisable to most of us now. As James et al (2010) suggest, ‘The lack of a capable governing body is not a neutral absence; it is a substantial disadvantage for a school’(p93). Therefore a better understanding of how governors conceptualise their involvement and the personal values they bring to it is vital. Thus this paper draws on both personal experience as a governor over 20 years, and a survey of 500 governors in one local area, carried out in 2012. The survey examined the motivation behind those who volunteer to govern, and what keeps them going amid all the changes and challenges currently happening within the school system. What are the reasons that people give for being a school governor in 2012, and what is it about being a governor that they value?

The research

As this symposium is specifically about vocation and volunteering, I decided to carry out some small scale research with governors that dealt particularly with their motivation. Other research into governance is also relevant to this area (2010, Balarin et al., 2008, Adams and Punter, 2008), and will be referenced where relevant, as these are large scale pieces and there are particular areas in each where findings are replicated. It is particularly interesting to see the differences in responses now several years on from these studies, in a very different policy environment for governors. For this research a questionnaire was sent out to just under 500 governors in one small local authority to seek their views about why they originally became a governor, what keeps them going as a volunteer governor and what they view as the key challenges for school governors in 2012 and onwards. The response rate was good, with just over a third responding. Of those, 60% were female, and 90% of the total were from the primary sector. The latter figure is high because the questionnaire was distributed via a local authority governor’s service, and most primary schools in the area still retain the governor service. The average age of the group was between 40 and 60, with 40% having been governors for over five years. There was also 38% of the sample who had become governors, relatively recently, in the last two years. Governors responded in great detail to the survey. This paper is structure around three areas: initial motivation; keeping motivated; challenges for the future.
Some brief background literature

Balarin et al. (2008) suggest that, since being a governor is a voluntary activity, participants require the motivation, capability and opportunity to participate. These three aspects are true of becoming involved for most volunteers. For school governors in particular, James et al. (2010) put it succinctly:

*The overall picture is that governors want to be valued and welcomed and to undertake work for the governing body and the school. They also enjoy being associated with successful schools and seeing children benefit. All these factors are motivators. Factors that lead to dissatisfaction appear to come under the headings of workload, complexity, dealings with outside agencies and financial problems.*

They also suggest, (ps48-49) that there are three main sub-themes in governor motivation, with interplay between, which are:

- Self-interest
- Interests of others
- External motivation (defined as where becoming a governor is part of another role in the community)

These three are very broad categorisations, yet they are useful in outlining the general reasons why people might become involved in the role of governor. These three overarching themes can also be seen as merging over time, and being constantly on the move depending on the school context. These tendencies to ebb and flow over time are most clearly seen in the initial reasons why people choose to be governors.

**Initial Motivation**

In the survey, governors gave rich and varied reasons why they were drawn initially to the task of school governance. These can be characterised broadly as altruistic, or certainly that’s how the responses were crafted. Analysing the data, there appears to be a distinctive overlap between self interest and serving others. This may well be because the fact of the overlap is the very thing that makes an individual interested in this particular kind of volunteering.

Governors appeared to become involved initially in particular ways, some of which overlapped in the responses. James et al.’s three sub-themes were also useful in identifying the motivations, although there does seem to be a difficulty in ascertaining where altruism ends and self-interest begins. The themes I identified could easily be mapped against self interest, interest of others, and external motivation, but I wanted to look at the mixture of motives in more detail. These motives were:

- Out of a sense of personal giving to the community (giving back/representing the underrepresented);
- Different kinds of influence - As a way of helping to make the school better/best for all; As a way of being more influential in own child’s education; as a means of understand more about education at the present time;
- For own career development;

Looking at these themes in more detail, personal giving appears in almost 30% of the statements about initial involvement in school life;
I wanted to be of assistance and I appreciated how hard all the staff work to ensure my son has the best possible start to his education.

Now I am retired (former headteacher) I thought it would be good to put something back into the system supporting a school I know well.

To help support our small village school.

I went to school at the same school and wanted to 'give something back’.

I wanted some voluntary work in the local community.

To put something back into the education process.

I wanted to make a difference, I like education, and I thought I could link the two by being a governor.

Altruism is, of course, a socially acceptable reason to become involved in volunteering. It could be expected, therefore, that some of the respondents to the survey would couch their responses in terms of the greater good. It is pertinent to note that 40% of these sorts of statements were from parent governors, and at the same time, they often qualified their responses in terms of influence (knowledge) in their own particular child’s education. Some were very clear this was a primary factor, but amongst other factors:

To have knowledge about what was going on and to be able to influence decisions affecting my children

To be in the loop as regarding decisions at school

I was not happy with the governing body at my child’s school and decided that I would like to become more involved.

I decided to become a governor to offer support and also be in a position to question why.

I have a great interest in education and even more so now that I have twins at school I see what teachers do every day and wish to help.

This last statement neatly encapsulates many of the views of those who were parents and governors in the same school. It could also, I think, be assumed that some of the parental respondents who wanted to know more about schools at the present might also have wanted to be able to influence but didn’t express their motivation in terms of their specific children e.g. ‘As a parent governor I wanted the school to improve’. Others clearly did not have this particular interest, concentrating instead on their interest in education ‘I was interested in what makes a school tick and how it did (have no children)’. These were rarer.

Some governors were also motivated by career development specific to education. 5% were teachers who were looking towards senior roles, and so wanted to see at firsthand how a governing body functions:

I became a teacher representative when I was appointed Assistant Headteacher.

Staff governor to understand more about how a school is run and to represent staff views.
There were also a small percentage of retired teachers who wanted to keep their involvement so that their expertise could be used.

Some had become involved in voluntary initiatives through their workplaces:

> My company was promoting volunteering and on one of the calls being a governor was suggested. I had not considered this before as my own daughter had been in a private school.

> I am a chartered accountant and work for ICAEW. They had a campaign to encourage members to take on voluntary roles.

The aspect that I did find very interesting was that some suggested they were needed as representatives of groups that might not come forward. Although only 2%, this was put quite powerfully:

> Why did I become a governor? To represent all those children that don’t have active parents or those who don’t have the confidence to come forward.

So the initial motivations were to be expected in terms of a mixture of motivations. Influence in its many differing forms seems to play a key role. It is clear that, as with Leaton Gray’s analysis of vocation (Leaton Gray, 2012), governors also identified very closely and personally with their particular schools.

**Keeping Going**

In terms of what helps governors carry on with their role, feeling that they were indeed making a difference was key. In particular, the way that the school expressed this back to the governors was very important in making them feel valued and wanting to carry on. Keeping governors motivated generated loyalty and a sense of pride in a joint enterprise. Schools that were able to show governors how they made that difference over time were highly prized, and this has implications for feedback to governors. Over 60% of the response contained statements related to value and loyalty to the school e.g.

> Feeling my views are valued

> Loyalty to the school and the governing body

> Knowing my input is valued by the school

Governors also noted the importance of interpersonal relationships and teamwork in the above and in keeping them motivated over time, and even in stopping them leaving.

> I believe I am part of an important and effective team.

> I am retired and have the time and I enjoy it.

> The positive relationships I have with the team.

> Governors are happy to have a laugh while still working on the matters in hand.

Others drew attention to their commitment to the continuing success of the school, and the role of community as a reason for continuing. This is
The continuing effort to uphold the ethos of a fine local school amid the turmoil of changing national policy.

The interests and future of my own children, their friends and classmates and youngsters throughout the neighbourhood who deserve the very best education that we can deliver.

When you see the difference a good education makes to children’s lives that keeps you going.

The continuing success of the school and the pride I take from being involved.

Having frank discussions with the senior team about cutting edge practice!

Three of the governors in the survey were thinking of stepping down. One mused on what they role meant to them:

*My child leaves the school this year. I am thinking about whether to continue. The new Head actually values and listens to parents and governors so while the role is now more enjoyable, it is perhaps less necessary.*

In terms of long term sustainability, most were keep motivated by being a valued part of a team, or part of a long term project to help a particular school improve by being robust in their questioning and reading. Both of these have added resonance at a time when many primary schools are becoming academies against the wishes of dedicated parent bodies.

Practical points were also very important in maintaining their interest over time. Training was valued, and the role of the local authority’s governor development service was praised.

One quote seemed to sum up the general flavour of the respondents:

*Having got myself involved I find it hard to justify removing that level of experience I have from the equation. It’s not that I am irreplaceable, far from it, but with the relationships I have built up over years, and the appreciation I get from the school staff for what I consider a small contribution, why would I want to withdraw from a position where I can see the results of my input in such a positive outcome!*

Overall, as with what started them as a governor, there was clearly a mixture of influence and altruism.

**Challenges for the future**

Governors were asked to suggest their challenges for the future as governors. Common issues were time management, both in governing with the number of meetings that they were asked to attend, and balancing voluntary work with paid employment. Some also found ‘endless seas of paperwork’. Many cited school specific events that were taking up a great deal of time such as re organisation or expansion of existing provision.

Governors struggled with the knowledge base of governing, as they viewed it as ever changing. Newer governors noted the time required to understand what was expected of them:

*I am a very new governor so at the moment most things are challenging. Getting to understand my role and what I have to offer.*
Understanding the role in practical terms.

Working out what it is I need to know

This last point is reiterated by two experienced governors:

It is a steep learning curve as a parent governor, because you do not have the basic knowledge that a lot of the staff have. Four years as a governor means that you are just starting to get a grip of the knowledge and the school and its aims before you leave.

Understanding the challenges schools are facing, especially when I have never worked in, or had any connection with, education. Finding the time to research and learn about things e.g. academies. Keeping up to date and keeping up the momentum between meetings.

This difficulty in keeping pace, whether in time or knowledge terms, was identified by over 80% of the governors. It could be summed up by, as one put it ‘keeping abreast of the rapidly changing educational landscape’. Governors were most concerned about how their school was being affected by OFSTED, legislative changes and the increased burden these put on governors:

The government has increased expectations on governing bodies. Sometimes I think they forget we’re volunteers and don’t have all day to do everything. In the current political climate gaining information on real alternatives to the academy route i.e. we stumbled across the cooperative schools model. Having expert knowledge on enough things.

Political dogma and the absence of a supportive, collegiate network for schools. Schools are isolated (though some of them do not yet realise this is the case).

One governor called this dilemma the ‘OFSTED/Gov view of us, rather than mine, as the well meaning, supportive amateur’. Ofsted changes were also a common challenge – ‘the constantly changing expectations of the OFSTED criteria and the inequality of this in different schools settings’.

Underlying these concerns were also more personal ones. If teamwork and being valued is a motivational factor for governors, the opposite can also be extremely taxing. Just over 5% had issues with this aspect, for example:

Not sure the governing body gels well- there are only two members willing to challenge the head.

Governor colleagues pursuing personal agenda rather than the best interests of the school.

Other governors not pulling their weight

Ensuring other governors are fully engaged.

Would any of this be resolved if governors were no longer volunteers, and were paid for the time they spent on this work? Governors were almost 100% against this. This was for several reasons, it seemed. The first was the intrinsic rewards were what made the task rewarding:

It should remain voluntary, the progress, achievement and enjoyment the children gain from the school is reward enough.
I personally would not want to be paid as this would put in question my integrity and impartiality. I think if money was involved you would attract a different type of person who would have other interests apart from the school.

It ought to remain voluntary. Having given freely of my time for more than 25 years, I should regard it as an insult to be offered pay!

The second reason follows on from the end of the last quote that people’s agendas might change if they were paid, or their motives might somehow be questionable. As one governor put it:

The fact that all governors are unpaid shows commitment to the school. If it was paid, selection of people would take on a different aspect and at the moment it is the diverse nature of our governing body that makes it so effective.

However, a small minority argued that this might indeed be a good thing, as it would bring more skills for example experienced Chairs to IEBs. There was also a running thread in the responses which suggested that volunteers were in a governmental Catch 22. Governors knew they could claim expenses, yet many, as primary school governors agreed with this governor:

I am aware that any reimbursement would come out of the school budget. Therefore we do not claim anything.

Finally, respondents were keen to stress the community aspect of unpaid work.

It should remain unpaid with all the problems that untrained volunteers bring. The alternative is a cadre of appointees (or worse, self-appointed) individuals, some with questionable motives, dogmas and allegiances. Community participation is the best safeguard.

It is important that it stays unpaid as it is the community investing personal capital into the welfare and education of our future.

This aspect of the Big Society appears alive and well in governance.

**Summary**

With all the current changes, governors appear to remain enthused as volunteers, motivated first and foremost by a desire to make a difference. To paraphrase from work on teacher vocation ‘it is clear that the human aspects were important—pupils, parents and the day to day lived experience of schooling. This is what they were the most interested in’ (Leaton Gray, 2012). If that voluntary work has personal spin offs in terms of career development that is important, but not a defining aspect of this sort of voluntary work. Reading all the responses, I was struck by the commitment to the future that working as a school governor embodies with its implications for the life chances of young people. In spite of massive changes, role overload, and growing accountability, governors see themselves as the guardians of their community’s future. This view has implications for local democracy as the Coalition government move to change schools status without reference to the current governors. One of the many responses summed up for me the dedicated nature of this particular kind of volunteering:

I had a breakdown before Christmas so have been unable to attend meetings but I have kept involved with the school in other ways and by chatting with some of the parents and passing on concerns or praise.
If enhancing public engagement is important, this dedication underpins it. James et al discuss the notion of governance capital (2010 p 83). This is described as ‘the network of individuals and their capabilities, relationships and motivations that are available for the governance of any particular school’. This research has helped to understand further that the voluntary nature of governance is a strong building block of governance capital, and may well be a significant strength of school governance.
References

James, C., Brammer, S., Connelly, M., Fertig, M., James, J. and Jones, J. (2010) CfBT.