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Configuring School and Community for Learning: the role of governance

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ABSTRACT The argument of the paper proposes that learning grows out of motivation which depends upon recognising and valuing the distinctive qualities of each and the cultural traditions they embody. If learning expresses a journey between worlds, the challenge for the school is to create a learning community that brings together local and cosmopolitan in its pedagogic practices. This configuration of the school and its communities, by interconnecting the symbolic orders of each, creates the conditions for relevance, motivation and learning. Excellent teachers have always sought, as a defining principle of their individual practice, to relate activities within their classroom to the interests of the child. But the argument being developed here proposes that this configuration is a strategic and systemic task for the governance of school as a whole institution.

The Conventional Wisdom on Governance and School Improvement

The governance of schools, reconstituted by the Education Reform Acts of 1986/88, has been the subject of review since the late 1990s. The Conservative Government's legislation created powerful deregulated schools, to be governed by volunteer citizens. It has been the country's most extensive experiment in democracy to renew civil society. Now, fifteen years later, questions have again been raised about the roles and responsibilities of governing bodies: whether the boundary between governance and management of schools is appropriately drawn, and whether too much is expected of volunteers in terms of time and responsibility. Most significantly, doubts continue for some about whether governance makes a distinctive contribution to school improvement. Do governing bodies matter?

The dominant paradigm of school improvement emphasises the professional characteristics of enhancing the performance of schools. Research, internationally and nationally, draws attention to the importance of the learning environment, the high quality of teaching and learning, monitoring pupil progress and careful planning and purposeful teaching (Reynolds *et al.*, 1996; Macbeath & Mortimore, 2001; Stoll *et al.*, 2001). The involvement of parents has begun to be acknowledged as contributing to student progress, but the role of governing bodies in improving schools and raising standards is neglected.

More recently the case for the potential contribution of governance to improved school performance has been argued (Scanlon *et al.*, 1999; Bird, 2002; Ofsted/HMI, 1999, 2001; Martin & Holt, 2002). Better governance sharpens the practice of management, which in turn generates improved standards of achievement. What these studies point to is the role

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which governing bodies can play in reinforcing the quality of institutional leadership: providing strategy, enabling scrutiny of direction and practice, offering guidance and support, and ensuring accountability. These qualities secure the authority and trust of schools as public institutions. By helping to improve the working of the institution the governing body will make more effective the environment of learning and teaching and thus the possibility of enhanced standards of educational achievement. Better governance establishes processes that generate better results.

This paper draws upon recent research into school governing bodies [1] to develop an interpretive analysis of the potential contribution of governance to improvement. This analysis is provoked by the experience of governors and managers in four schools in contexts of disadvantage that had successfully practised but then begun to question the dominant paradigm of school improvement. They had constructed strong governing bodies incorporating members with influence and social capital from the authority, the professions and local business. They worked in partnership with professional leaders to clarify strategic purposes and translated these into articulate action plans that were extensively communicated to ensure shared understanding, and subject to routine monitoring and review. These practices created the drive and leadership to transform the schools, turning failing institutions into achieving schools. Two schools emerged from 'special measures', one of which received a letter from the Secretary of State to congratulate them for being one of the most improved schools in the country.

Though these schools improved they began to question whether this could be sustained and believed an alternative approach was necessary. They hinted at what this might imply in terms of learning and teaching, parental participation and school governance. The purpose of this paper is to theorise their sketch on the role of governance in constituting learning communities. Further research will be needed to investigate the validity of this argument, or thought experiment, in experience.

The Limits of the Dominant Paradigm of Improvement

Despite achievement these schools have come to believe that the framework of improvement they have been pursuing is limited and will need adapting or replacing if improvement is to continue and be sustained. The head teacher of a primary school argues that the regime of targeting and monitoring can only achieve so much:

> I feel we have done everything that we can possibly do as professionals. Massive folders prepared by teachers: lesson observation notes, target setting notes, and for every lesson taught, all the learning objectives, differentiation, plenary, key words and assessment all the way through . . . What I am saying is that we could only further improve the results marginally.

A co-opted governor of the primary school, a retired secondary teacher, reinforced this analysis, believing that 'you can't keep putting pressure on, and putting pressure on and putting pressure on: it only works to a certain degree. Sooner or later you have got to start looking at other ways of improving things.' A secondary school in Wales has improved considerably, raising the number of students who achieve five GCSEs at level A to C from 24 per cent to 60 per cent. Yet the head teacher is concerned that the school is 'now stuck on this plateau' and wonders 'how they are to move on'.

Both schools identify two key sources of the constraints on their further achievement. One is the exclusion of specific parent communities from the life of the school and from representation on the governing body. Both schools draw from both advantaged and

disadvantaged communities. Both exclude the disadvantaged and have come to acknowledge that this has been a fundamental mistake and forms a central barrier to continued improvement. The primary head teacher is clear that reproducing the 'performitivity approach' alone will only improve results marginally, 'but to actually make a bigger difference . . . it's going to have to be by involving the parents; I have come to the conclusion that we must involve all the parents much more in education.' The school's deputy head teacher agrees with this analysis:

> Our governing body is not representative of our community . . . I think perhaps parents from (the estate) have this mystique about the governing body, and they think that no one from their background would be able to do the job.

What is being lost?

> A huge amount. For a start I think that if we had more mums and dads from that background it would raise standards immediately because it would encourage more parents to become involved and they would see the school more as theirs. It is a huge mountain, an obstacle, if you like, to try and overcome.

The secondary school in Wales similarly believes the exclusion of parents from the two working class estates to be one significant reason that they are on a plateau of 'stuck' performance. The school has failed, he argues, to reflect on the learning needs of young people in two highly disadvantaged estates, and has failed to involve the parents of these communities both in the life of the school and on the governing body.

> The GB is not representative: What is lost? Inclusion in a word. To get people to feel part of the school, and that's difficult. If we are not careful you can be governed by the more vociferous areas of the catchment and then you get the alienation where parents feel that their voice is not being heard. Their initial reaction is that the school will have a downer on their child, that they won't get fair treatment.10% of our youngsters could be really alienated with what we provide them. If they were better represented on the GB there would be a voice for more curricular choice, greater flexibility. If you haven't got the motivation and commitment of the community you're not going to get anywhere.

These schools have come to recognise that teachers alone cannot help children to achieve. The support of parents, carers and the home is indispensable if children are to achieve and sustain their achievement. The professionals and governors in these schools have begun to learn what research has been communicating for some time (Macbeth, 1995; Martin & Vincent, 1999; Wolfendale & Bastiani, 2000; Vincent, 2000)—that parents are complementary partners if education is to succeed. Including parents is then the first barrier to be overcome.

The schools have begun to identify a further limitation on extending and sustaining achievement: the 'performativity' approach to learning and teaching. The emphasis upon target setting and monitoring applies pressure to young people to concentrate and improve on their previous best results. It works to a certain extent. Focus does improve performance on the tasks selected. But are the pupils motivated to continue their progress, enjoying their learning for the perceived benefits it is bringing to them? The co-opted governor of the primary school believed that 'the pressure pedagogy' alone could sustain improvement: alternative approaches to encouraging learning need to be developed. The head and chair of

the secondary school in Wales also believe that the learning needs of the marginalized children have to be recognised and provided for if they are to achieve. The argument for the urgent need to find a connection between the curriculum in school and the social and cultural frames of the community was expressed most persuasively by two African-Caribbean parent governors in a London Borough primary and secondary schools. These parents describe the lack of understanding between school and home and the failure to acknowledge the parent as co-educator as serious barriers to motivation and learning.

Elaine (black parent governor, London Borough Primary)
Dialect—speaking and reading: 'because they speak differently in slang or in Jamaican … if a school doesn't kind of value or recognise ways of speaking, that's where a lot of the children get left behind, because they're not understanding that the vowels, or the sounds in those vowels are completely different maybe, and the pronunciation then would be for that child would be hard because he doesn't understand—he might be saying the words but it's not coming out in a way that the school or the teacher would understand it. So to them it's wrong, but yet it's right in his mind, and so then he's obviously feels (unfairly) rejected … then it all turns round in his mind and obviously he'll then think to himself, well, he doesn't want to do this any more, and the barriers go up.'
Cultural differences and the curriculum: 'our children should know about their history.' Issues of cultural identity should be in the learning process right from the beginning. More attention is paid than in the past, but much more needs to be done. 'I think they need to address that more simply because then everybody could connect I have found within the school that the ethnic children are not really understanding, and because of their lack of understanding—the teachers, they haven't got really maybe the time to actually—they need a bit more one to one work, and things like that for them to actually catch up but again I also think as well that it stems back to the parents are not as involved with the child as well, they're not giving them enough.
Resistance to change on part of parents and school: 'It is about change and it is about, it's not just within the school environment, it's a lot to do with parents as well, and I think that's where the communication—at the moment I think there's a lack of communication between schools and parents.'

Figure 1. **A parent-governor's thoughts on motivation and learning**

The schools' own diagnosis of their achievement is that the system of external targets and monitoring has supported the progress which they have made. Nevertheless they have come to regard this model of 'performativity' as fundamentally limited, unlikely to extend or sustain the improvement they are making. Further improvement, they propose, will only be realised by developing strategies that are more like to motivate pupils and sustain their interest in learning. This requires, they believe, a twin strategy of introducing new approaches to learning and teaching and encouraging parental participation in the life and governance of the school.

The research schools have begun to sketch their beliefs about what alternatives of learning and teaching and parental participation might be required to sustain and extend the achievement of their young people. The task for the remainder of this paper is to begin to theorise the pedagogy and form of governance implicit in their embryonic accounts of the need for change.

The argument to be established below proposes that motivation depends upon meaning, and meaning is constituted by the life-worlds which shape our upbringing. If motivation and meaning are to be realised in school then learning needs to connect to the worlds of home and community with the public world of the school. If the institution is to constitute both local and public within its practice of learning and teaching this, it is concluded, is necessarily a constitutive function of governance rather than a task of specialist knowledge alone. The

following sections of the paper seek to develop theoretical analysis of the interdependent conditions these schools believe need to be fulfilled if motivation is to be enhanced: the need for renewing approaches to learning and for inclusion and governance.

Renewing Learning: theorising a pedagogy of recognition

Over the past decade a discourse on a 'new learning' has begun to emerge which challenges the dominant paradigm of learning and teaching (Brighouse & Woods, 1998; Bentley, 1998; Young, M., 2000). Education has traditionally pursued too narrow a conception of purpose, based on forms of knowledge and competence rather than preparing young people for the practice of living in society. Gardner (1993) has criticised the narrow conception of human capacity as cognitive intelligence alone, and sought to encourage a much broader recognition of human capability and thus the variety of styles in which young people can learn and be motivated to learn; while Goleman (1996) and Nussbaum (2001) exhort us to restore the role of emotional well being in learning. A number of studies (Starratt, 1996; Ranson, 1997; Bentley, 1998, 2000; Nixon *et al.*, 2001) have argued for more active approaches to learning beyond the classroom, which serve to prevent schools and colleges becoming islands of socialisation detached from the families and communities they are supposed to serve.

A new learning may be emerging, yet there remains a need to develop theoretical understanding of its informing pedagogic principles. Learning depends upon motivation, which grows out of a sense that learning has a purpose, and this is likely to unfold when learners develop a confidence that reflects recognition of their distinctive qualities and capabilities. The defining ideas of such a pedagogy of recognition can be elaborated as:

- The nature of learning as becoming.
- The source of learning in recognition.
- The practice of learning communities as the condition for learning.

Learning as Becoming

Our unfolding agency reveals layers of discovery. The acquisition of new skills and knowledge may enhance our capabilities, but a deeper layer of learning lies in our developing understanding of who we are, our distinctive identity, and what we might make of ourselves; learning is becoming. For Taylor (1985), such agency grows out of learning to reflect upon a life process that is not immediately transparent, and to formulate ourselves—and our purposes—more adequately. Action is not essentially 'aware' and to make it so is an achievement that transforms understanding and action: such consciousness produces reflective analysis upon the deep interpretive and evaluative schema routinely embodied in practice.

This unfolding agency of the self, however, is always inescapably a social creation mediated through mutual recognition and understanding. While philosophers have expressed the notion of life as a quest (MacIntyre, 1982, 1999), it has been the field of social psychologists that has begun to theorise the layers of learning as the progressive expansion of individual and co-operative capabilities (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Engestrom, 1999). Building on the work of an anthropologist, Bateson (1972), they examine the layers or loops of learning as follows:

- learning to copy good practice deemed correct in a given context (*imitative learning*);
- learning to analyse and understand the deep-seated rules of practices of the context (*developing understanding*); and

- learners begin to question existing practice and to deliberate with others to construct a wider alternative context and in so doing begin to design their own futures. This learning is essentially a collective endeavour (*the transforming of practice*) (Engestrom, 1999).

Such expansion of capability embodies a journey in recognising the value of goods worth pursuing—especially those internal goods of reflective evaluation that are valued because they enable us to judge the progress we are making in the activities which fill our lives. Such progression will depend upon motivation, but how is this generated in the learning process.

Learning from Meaning and Recognition

Motivation grows out of a sense of purpose that derives from the relevance of the activities for the learner and the life she is leading—because we are embodied beings, shaped by the forms of life and culture that give our experience value and make our actions intelligible (Mulhall, 2001; Wittgenstein, 1953). When learning connects with the 'webs of significance' which shape our lives (Geertz, 1975), we perceive its meaning and its relevance. Meaning has such significance for learning because living does.

The pedagogic task, argues Bruner (1996, 2000), is thus to recognise this significance of meaning for learning: of connecting activities of school and college to the ways of life and thought, which shape the everyday lives of young people. Children are not deprived of 'culture', they are cultural beings from the first, active agents striving to develop a way of being in the world drawing on the language and resources in a form of life to make sense of themselves, the particular form of life they live and their place within it.

Learning as the construction of meaning implies recognition of the distinctive qualities and capabilities of the learner. Recognition of who we are, our identity, is the source of self esteem and confidence which provide the condition for developing autonomy. Our self-realisation grows out of relationships of mutual recognition (Hegel, 1977; Taylor, 1992; Honneth, 1995; Sennett, 2003). The precious parts of the learners' lived experiences, identity and history need to be recognised and valued within the school. As Richardson (1990) argues: 'their culture, language and dialect, and countless experiences, stories and memories of their families, communities and friends, including in particular stories of oppression and injustice' (1990, p. 101; cf. Richardson & Miles, 2003). If learning is to connect with learners' own history and experience schools will need to learn to value the cultural capital which students bring and devise a socially and culturally relevant curriculum (Collins *et al.*, 2002).

Between Worlds

The learner, therefore, cannot be educated effectively independently of her community's webs of significance. The school has to develop detailed knowledge of an individual's uniqueness that grows out of attention and care to their needs, valuing and nurturing the distinctive identity and voice of each (Fielding, 1997, 2001). Supportive relationships (as provided by mentors and tutors) in the learning process are vital to securing this attentive understanding of individual learning needs, and securing emotional commitment to learning.

Yet the process of learning is inescapably a journey between worlds, which connects the language of home and community with the language of the public space. Learning is always a bi- (or multi-) lingual experience as we learn to move between genres and codes of the tacit and particular and the explicit and universal. The challenge for the school as Fielding (2001) proposes is to create the dialogue and the pedagogic materials that enable this co-

construction of meaning and relevance, grounding learning in the personal and familiar while tying it in to worlds of difference. The curriculum, the approach to learning and teaching, the processes of assessing progress all need to form bridges between worlds (Young, M., 1998, 1999, 2000)

A school cannot achieve its purposes without mediating worlds—remaking itself as an institution in and for its communities of difference, understanding the interdependent nature of learning and living, and yet encouraging the capabilities that enable learners to flourish between cultures in a cosmopolitan public world. The medium of potential tension in this learning is reflective dialogue (Wells, 2000) that enables the give and take of claims to negotiate a frame of shared meanings and agreement in the space of reason. It is the elaborate code of communicative rationality within a community of practical reasoners able to examine and evaluate their common goods (Habermas, 1984, 1990).

Learning Communities

That learning grows out of motivation grounded in co-configuration of meaning between worlds requires a school to create a learning community of mutual recognition that embraces institutions, parents and their communities as well as the codes of the public sphere. Wenger (1998, 2000) suggests that learning communities can play this role because of the bridges they form:

> Learning communities require enough structure and continuity to accumulate experience, and enough perturbation and discontinuity to continually renegotiate meaning. They transform our identities by building personal histories in relation to the histories of our communities and create bridges between our multi-membership of various communities (e.g., home, school, work). (Collins *et al.*, 2002, p. 134)

Learning communities form the condition for recognition and becoming. Learners require the support of others if they are to learn and to realise what they can become. But what are learning communities? They are characterised by qualities of relationship rather than being defined by any particular social or educational form. A family, a firm, a profession, or a governing body can be a learning community as much as a school, and the latter can only be described as a learning community if it reveals specific processes at work rather than because it is an 'educational' institution. As a *community* it will be characterised by expressive as well purposive (non compartmentalised) relationships, enable a sense of identity and belonging (memory), and enable mutuality and friendship through collaborative endeavour. A more expanded understanding of the object of learning locates the social form (for example, school-in-its-communities) in its local communities and seeks to examine the nature of their interdependence.

Robert Starratt (1996) is unique in his theorising of the relationship of institutional and pedagogic form. In *the pursuit of meaning in a learning community* begins to set out the practices that a school needs to develop if it is to work 'between worlds' to connect the meanings of school-and-community. It would be a critical community of inquirers, a caring environment, and a school in which meanings would be continuously related to students' life-worlds through learning. This involves storytelling from the experiences of everyday life; leads to production/performance; explores large moral questions of meaning and being; and explores the meta-narrative social and cultural issues of the time.

The learning that takes place in the community could focus on the extent to which its members are engaged in learning, are supporting the learning of others (nurturing), and

learning from others, from difference (reciprocity). Once more, however, an expanded understanding of the object of learning would grasp the learning as a collective activity through which members were working to transform the community, to become a community. In this perspective a learning community is a community of inquiry, in search of itself, acknowledging plural identities and voices that can be accommodated only by enabling all to participate in deliberation of common concerns in pursuit of shared understanding and agreement.

Governance at the Fulcrum of Learning

The unfolding argument proposes that learning grows out of motivation, which depends upon recognising and valuing the distinctive qualities of each and the cultural traditions they embody. If learning expresses a journey between worlds, the challenge for the school is to create a learning community that brings together local and cosmopolitan in its pedagogic practices.

This configuration of the school and its communities, by interconnecting the symbolic orders of each, creates the conditions for relevance, motivation and learning. Excellent teachers have always sought, as a defining principle of their individual practice, to relate activities within their classroom to the interests of the child. But the argument being developed here proposes that this configuration is a strategic and systemic task for the school as a whole institution.

Understanding this interdependence of learning and living leads to a conclusion that it is the function of governance to constitute the structures of mutual recognition within and between the school and its communities. The professional specialist will have a vital role to play in judging the appropriate learning materials that will forge the connection of meaning between cultures. But the task of creating the learning community, to include worlds of difference, cannot alone be the responsibility of the knowledgeable specialist. It is, principally, a function of governance to constitute the forms of life in the public sphere and, in so doing, constitute the springs of motivation and the conditions of learning. Realising achievement depends on governance as the condition for recognition and motivation. What are these qualities of governance that are needed to shape the practice of an inclusive institution?

Membership and Participation

An inclusive democratic community strives to ensure that the multiplicity of differences within a community are present, rather than merely represented within governance (Young, I., 1990, 2000; Taylor, 1992; Tully, 1995; Phillips, 1995). Governing bodies in 1986 were constituted to include all those with a stake in and concern for the nature of schooling—teachers, parents, the LEA, communities and businesses were allocated a place on the governing body and therefore in its deliberations.

Voice, Dissent and Deliberation

Voice is the distinctive characteristic of the public sphere, capturing its essential feature of citizens speaking out to communicate their claims and protests (Hirschmann, 1970; Gilligan, 1982). In a governing body each has a right to a say, including questioning, scrutinising and opposing dominant groups and the status quo: '. . . the possibility of effective opposition is an essential requirement of democratic justice' (Shapiro, 1999). Dissent can only be resolved through a multi-sided conversation that allows the participants

to deliberate their differences (Bohman & Rehg, 1997; Dryzek, 2000) in the space of public reasons (McDowell, 1996; Scanlon, 1998; Brandom, 2001).

Judgement and Distribution of Collective Goods

Deliberation leads to judgement about the distributions of collective goods that determines the form of advantage in the public sphere. Allocating *material resources* (finance, equipment, staffing) will reveal how an institution conceives different needs and the support required. If the argument about pedagogy above is sound, however, the fundamental common goods constituted by governance are those of respect, value and recognition. Rawls (1971, 1982) called these *primary goods*, the distribution of rights, statuses, opportunities and duties that accord to members 'the social bases of respect' (Rawls, 1982, p. 162). Bernstein understood the implications of this in schools:

> A school metaphorically holds up a mirror in which an image is reflected. There may be several images, positive and negative. A school's ideology may be seen as a construction in a mirror through which images are reflected. The question is who recognises themselves as of value? What other images are excluded by the dominant image of value, so that some students are unable to recognise themselves. In the same way we can ask about the acoustic of the school. Whose voice is heard? Who is speaking? Who is hailed by this voice? For whom is it familiar? (Bernstein, 2000, p. xxi)

By establishing these principles of participation, allocation, regulation and distribution of knowledge and value a governing body can constitute the bridges of mutual recognition between the local worlds of specific cultures and the cosmopolitan world of the school and the wider public sphere. Its membership should involve members of the diverse cultures, and should work on its practices to ensure their voice is heard, and through them the needs of the community are heard. But the strategic work of the governing body needs to exercise all its distributive and regulatory functions outlined above to ensure the cultural capital and learning needs of disadvantaged network of communities are included and translated into the pedagogic practice of the institution.

Linking the Ecclesia to the Agora: a concluding discussion

A conclusion that governance constitutes the structures of mutual recognition follows from an argument about the interdependent nature of learning and living. Learning grows out of motivation and recognition grounded in detailed knowledge and care of individuals and thus a valuing and including of forms of life in the school. The practice of a school lies between worlds. A child cannot be effectively educated independently of her community webs of significance on the journey into the space of public reason. This can only emerge by creating learning communities that embrace institutions, parents and communities and practices of learning which depend upon getting governance right because in constituting the community's forms of life and symbolic orders in the public sphere governance constitutes the springs of motivation and the conditions for learning.

The significance of governance, it is argued, reaches deeply into the life stream of educational institutions. This radical analysis proposes that governance and learning are indissolubly mutually inter-connected. On the one hand governance becomes a constitutive condition of effective learning and, on the other, this relation to learning plays back on the

need for a democratic form of governance that needs to learn how to include plurality of communities in the public space. This is the striking potential of the research: securing the argument for democratic governance by tying it into the very life stream of learning and living.

There will be a need, a senior HMI reported, for a school 'to grow a governing body' if it is to fulfil the demands of constituting a learning community. Parents from disadvantaged communities are more likely to develop the confidence to become members of the governing body when they have been involved in the life of the school. When they are invited to become mentors for young people, use their local knowledge and cultural capital to support the school, in helping to organise festivals, concerts, plays and musicals and artistic events parents will give expression to their varied capabilities. A school that creates forums for parents at the level of the class, year group and schools creates arenas that encourage and support the capabilities of voice, deliberation and collective judgement that are the defining characteristics required for the governing body.

In such ways membership and confidence in the governing body grow out of close involvement in and knowledge of the life of the school. It is the argument of Arendt (1958) that the ecclesia, the assembly, will be a more effective in its deliberations and decision taking when it is not detached from the life of the community but is a living expression of it (cf. Benhabib, 1992; Young, 1997; Bauman, 1999; Nixon, 2001).

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Notes

[1] The significant schools were drawn from two related projects. The first was for the ESRC Democracy and Participation Programme (Project L215252043, final report, Ranson *et al.*, 2003) 'The participation of volunteer citizens in the governance of education'. The second project was for the National Assembly for Wales, (final report, Ranson *et al.*, forthcoming, 2004), and called 'School governance and improvement in Wales'. Each project examined the relationship between governance and improvement and selected schools at different stages of improvement, often in contexts of disadvantage (In the ESRC study four schools were selected in one local authority in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and two in England; in the study of Wales eight schools were selected in nine LEAs, in addition to the ESRC Wales authority and schools). Surveys were administered to governors and interviews arranged with each category of governor. In specific case study schools at least half of governors were interviewed.

This paper is based on the evidence of governors at four schools, one in the Wales study, and three in the ESRC study of English LEAs. In each case the governors had, despite significant improvement, begun to question the limitations of the performance model of improvement because it was failing to motivate underachieving children from disadvantaged and minority ethnic communities.

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