The experiences of Black school governors in London

Final Report

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report presents results from a small-scale study of Black school governors in London. Using semi-structured interviews, the study explored the views of a sample of 12 participants from 7 local authorities about their experiences of governing, the role of their ethnicity in the governing process and their opinions about how to increase the recruitment and retention of Black school governors. The research was funded by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) and undertaken by the Institute for Policy Studies in Education (IPSE), London Metropolitan University between April and August 2006.

Key findings

- Reasons for joining - Having school-aged children and a desire to understand the education system were most commonly cited reasons for becoming a school governor. Some governors were also fuelled by a concern to support the achievement of Black pupils in particular.

- Joining process - Eight of the 12 participants had become governors after having been either approached by the school or after having received correspondence from the school which had advertised vacancies.

- Governing body composition - Governing bodies were largely reported to be balanced with regards to gender. It is not clear whether governing bodies viewed the issue of the ethnic group representation as important as in some cases the topic was never discussed and in one case, a participant was met by an uncomfortable silence when she raised the matter.

- Skills and experience - Participants had a range of professional and personal or life experiences that supported them in their role as governors which included legal, financial, human resources and management skills as well as confidence in working with people from a range of backgrounds.

- Disadvantages - Governors cited the amount of time and paperwork as key deterrents to governing. Some also described interpersonal challenges with co-governors who tended to monopolise meetings or operate in cliques from which they were excluded although there was little evidence to suggest that this was specifically due to ethnicity.

- Advantages - Participants enjoyed being part of the school environment and, in some cases having closer relationships with staff and parents. For some becoming a governor had led to new friendships and social networks. One governor stressed that receiving support from other Black parents and governors had been a rewarding outcome of becoming a governor.

- Role of ethnicity - Participants reported differing views as to whether they felt their ethnicity was important to their role as a school governor. In some cases other constructs such as age or social class appeared more important.

- Barriers to the participation of Black governors – Lack of awareness of the existence of and the role and responsibilities of school governors was cited as a key problem in attracting more Black governors. Participants also voiced concerns about personal commitments especially in view of the time constraints and family responsibilities of those within Black communities. These were both considered problems likely to be faced by lone parents whose number within Black communities was acknowledged to be significant. Negative experiences of the education system; lack of confidence; concerns about being the only Black person on governing bodies and a perception of governing bodies being comprised of white middle class individuals with little cultural awareness were also cited as key deterrents to attracting more Black governors.

- Recruitment - Recommendations for recruitment focus on raising the awareness of school governance and targeting media sources and organisations mainly accessed by those from Black communities. At a local level, schools and authorities could do more to highlight the presence of existing Black school governors by encouraging their participation at school events to challenge the image of the school governor as white and middle class. Schools are also encouraged to emphasize the importance of involving parents from a range of ethnic backgrounds in the decision-making processes of the school. The monitoring of governors by ethnicity at school, local and national level is also recommended to better understand the national picture regarding governing body composition and to appropriately target recruitment drives and support.

- Retention - The introduction of exit interviews and/or questionnaires assessed by ethnicity; local authority support for the development and co-ordination of Black governor forums and improving the understanding of issues regarding 'race' and ethnicity amongst all school governors are suggested as ways of improving the retention of Black school governors.

- Future research - This is a small-scale study which has offered an impressionistic insight into the experiences of a group of Black school governors. The research could helpfully be extended to incorporate a more representative sample which might include the views of Black governors from a range of locations across the country. In addition, it would be helpful to examine the experiences of other minority ethnic groups and white majority groups to establish the extent to which there are differences and similarities in the views recorded in this report.

Context

This section provides some background to the current research. It begins by offering an overview of the role and responsibilities of school governors which are increasing with the local management of schools and further education reforms. The various types of school governor are outlined before considering issues around recruitment and retention. The section on the characteristics of school governors presents the profile of the typical school governor with particular attention paid to ethnicity. The following section reports findings from research regarding possible barriers to participating as a governor and the final section considers the benefits of school governance.

Role of school governors

Governing bodies play a crucial role in the management of schools, working with staff and headteachers to ensure the best possible education for pupils. Responsibilities include: setting out the strategic aims and vision of the school; acting as a critical friend to the headteacher; ensuring continued accountability to both pupils and parents by, for example, holding annual parents' meetings and producing a related governors' report; managing the school budget; and, interviewing and appointing headteachers (Education Act, 2002; DfES, 2004). Governors also play an important role in helping to deliver the government's Five Year Strategy (DfES, 2005) which aims to encourage greater autonomy for schools; to support increased inter-school collaboration and to encourage them to offer a wider range of services for pupils, their families and the wider community beyond the traditional school day (DfES, 2004).

Categories of school governor

There are four main categories of school governor, namely: parent; staff; LEA appointed and community co-opted[1], with the latter category open to individuals from the wider community. However, new legislation introduced in March 2003 saw changes in the proportions of governors in each category and the introduction of two new discretionary positions of sponsor governor and associate member (DfES, 2004; Ellis, 2003).

Recruitment and retention

The responsibility for recruitment lies with governing bodies themselves and local authorities. It is estimated that of 350,000 governor places in England approximately 42,000 (12%) remain unfilled (DfES, 2004). Bird (2002) reports the vacancies to be greatest for co-opted governors compared with Scanlon, Earley & Evans (1999) who found that the largest number of vacancies were for LEA, followed by co-opted governors. There is consensus, however, that recruitment and retention remain a particular challenge in poorer, inner-city areas (Bird, 2002; Scanlon et al, 1999) and in special schools.

While there are common recruitment methods employed by local authorities, such as utilising word of mouth, advertising through existing governors and the placement of advertisements in local press (see Bird, 2003: 21 for details) there is little evidence to suggest that any one method

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[1] For full list and description of each category, see Appendix I.

is particularly effective. Further certain groups, such as those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, young people and lone parents remain under-represented on governing bodies (Ellis, 2003).

Characteristics of governors

Research by the Teacher Education Network (TEN) examining how governors might contribute to community cohesion and accountability within schools, revealed that data on the percentages of governors from minority ethnic backgrounds was rarely recorded by local education authorities and where it was collected, it was often done inadequately (Bird, 2002, 2003). Amongst those few authorities[2] who were able to supply governor ethnicity information, it was found that there were at least twice as many pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds as there were school governors from these backgrounds in London, metropolitan and unitary authorities. Even in London which serves as the focus for the current research and which has the highest percentage of people from minority ethnic backgrounds in England (White, 2002), these groups were twice as likely to be underrepresented as governors compared with their white counterparts.

The research by Bird (2003) shows that there are more female compared with male governors in England: 54% and 45% respectively. A similar pattern is evident for London. While there is a lack of quantitative data on social class, indications from the qualitative element of the research strongly suggests a greater number of governors are from middle class backgrounds than from lower social classes. In addition to the groups mentioned above (see *Recruitment and Retention*) Ellis (2003) also reports that disabled people and business people tend to be poorly represented on governing bodies.

Barriers to participation

Lack of time as well as poor awareness of school governance are key factors that deter individuals from volunteering as governors (Ellis, 2003; DfES 2004). Concerns about the formality of the recruitment process, childcare and travel costs[3], the four year term of office and former negative experiences of the education system were also regarded as deterrents (Ellis (2003).

Benefits to school governing

From her research which included interviews with thirty three governors from groups traditionally under-represented on school governing bodies (see *Characteristics of governors* above), Ellis (2003) found that governing was reported to engender a sense of satisfaction and pride amongst volunteers and also provided an opportunity to develop new skills as well as new friends and social networks. Personal development and improved employment prospects were also cited as benefits.

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[2] Bird (2002) reports that only one in three LEAs were able to provide this information.
[3] While these costs can usually be reimburse by schools, Ellis (2003) reports that most governors do not claim them as they feel guilty about depleting school resources.

Current research and Aims

While figures are not currently collected nationally on the ethnicity of school governors, it remains important, in an increasingly culturally diverse society that existing governing bodies and, those newly recruited to them, reflect the ethnic backgrounds of the communities they serve. This was a view recently espoused by Trevor Phillips, chair of the Commission for Racial Equality who, in a demand for more equal participation of ethnic groups, called for an increase in the diversity of those appointed to such bodies in order to begin to achieve "real commitment to equality in government, in our neighbourhoods, and in the workplace" (Phillips, 2005). Such participation may offer one way for individuals from Black and minority ethnic groups to share their perspectives and contribute to the decision-making in the schools in their communities (DfES, 2004). In addition, Bird (2002) stresses the need for "radical action" to address the representation and participation of Black and minority ethnic groups in view of their increasing youth population and the emphasis placed on schools for improving parental involvement.

While the increased involvement of individuals from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds to school governance is important, relatively little is known about the experiences of current school governors from these backgrounds. This study focuses on the experiences of one of these under-represented ethnic groups: Black[4] school governors. It is proposed that by exploring the views of existing Black school governors new strategies for improving their recruitment and retention might be suggested.

Aims

The current study seeks to examine the experiences of Black governors within the maintained school sector and, specifically, will:

1   examine how they learnt about school governance; their method of application and, why they chose to become governors
2   explore some of challenges faced by Black school governors
3   explore some of the successes experienced by Black school governors
4   establish their views on how to increase the number of Black governors

In so doing, the project aims to:

1   Suggest ways to better advertise for and recruit individuals from Black communities
2   Suggest ways for local authorities and schools to better support and retain existing Black school governors
3   Provide a means of giving prominence to the views and experiences of governors of Black African and African Caribbean heritages

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[4] Defined as those of African and African Caribbean heritage.

Research Methodology

The fieldwork for this project was conducted between April and June 2006.

An email advertisement inviting Black[5] school governors in London to participate in the project was sent to a number of teacher mailing lists and those focusing on issues related to race equality, organisations in the field of race relations and education, governor services within ethnically diverse and less diverse local authorities as well as to colleagues across a range of professions and sectors.

This is a small scale study based on the responses of 12 participants selected from a larger sample of twenty nine governors who had responded to the invitation to participate in the research and who had also completed a short form indicating their sex, age group, sector, local authority and length of time in service. The final sample was selected with priority given to balancing the group by gender, local authority and by sector. A significant number of those replying to the first request for participants were governors within the same local authority so the sampling process was repeated with the aim of including governors from a wider range of authorities. This imbalance remains with the final sample due to the desire to include the views of male governors.

The small sample size and the sampling process mean that the participants in this study cannot be said to be statistically representative of all Black governors in London. In addition, due to the diversity of experiences and perspectives within ethnic groups, the views which are reported cannot be said to reflect those of all Black governors. However, the findings that follow provide a useful insight of the experiences of a select group of Black governors in London.

Interviews took place at London Metropolitan University, at the governor's school or place of work according to which was most convenient for the participant. The interviews were semi-structured and included questions about why individuals chose to become school governors; the application process; challenges and benefits of governing; and, the role of their ethnicity in governing.

The interview transcripts were analysed using Nudist NVivo; a software programme for the analysis of qualitative data.

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[5] The definition mentioned in Footnote 4 was included in the advertisement.

Structure of the report

The report begins by describing the profile of the overall volunteer and participating sample in further detail. It then mirrors the approximate trajectory of a school governor by first considering participants' reasons for becoming a governor then by discussing their views of the joining process. The next section on the school governor role outlines participants' key areas of responsibility and committee membership. Consideration is then given to the composition of the governing body. 'Interactions with other governors' describes participants' view of and approach to meetings and the nature of interpersonal relationships during meetings.

The section on the role of ethnicity first considers governors' experiences in raising issues regarding ethnicity with the rest of the governing body and, second examines participants' views about the role of their ethnicity in their work as school governors. The following sections consider the advantages of and negative aspects to governing before making recommendations for recruitment and retention that are drawn both from governors' direct suggestions and from the broader research findings. Governors' plans for the future are examined in the next section.

The discussion summarises the key findings from the research and considers how the research might usefully be extended to obtain a clearer picture of how ethnicity is understood and experienced by all school governors.

Findings

This section first examines the profiles of the overall and participant samples before discussing the findings from the interviews.

Governor profiles

Overall sample

Twenty five (86%) of the overall sample of 29 governors were women and four (14%) were male. Of the twenty-eight governors providing their age, ten (36%) were aged between 40 and 49 years, eight (29%) between 30 and 39 and seven (25%) were aged between 50 and 59 years. Two governors were in the youngest 20 to 29 age group and one in the 60 years plus group.

Twenty-seven governors provided information regarding the sector in which they were based as a governor. Most of the participants in the total sample tended to have young children, which may account for the high percentage (67%) of primary school governors. Secondary school governors accounted for 30% of the sample and the nursery sector for 3% of the sample.

Almost half of the total sample were parent governors with local authority and community governors the next most occupied roles.

As explained in the methodology, the initial invitation yielded a large number of governors from one local authority. These governors accounted for 71% of the total sample. All but one participant governed in ethnically and culturally diverse local authorities.

Participating sample

Twelve participants were selected from the total sample with priority paid to including male governors, participants from different local authorities and those based in different sectors (see figure 1 for details).

Half of those interviewed for the study were parent[6] governors with community and local authority governors the next most frequently occupied roles, reflecting the general picture for the total sample who had volunteered to participate in the research. Approximately two-thirds of the sample were based in primary schools.

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[6] One of the participants had been elected as a co-opted governor but has a child at the school.

Governor	Sex	Age Group	L.A.*	Sector	Years	Type
A	male	20 to 29 years	1	secondary	2.5	community
B	female	40 to 49 years	3	secondary	2	co-opted/ parent**
C	female	40 to 49 years	4	primary	5	LEA
D	male	20 to 29 years	1	secondary	3	LEA
E	female	30 to 39 years	2	primary	3	co-opted
F	male	60 years plus	1	secondary	4	parent
G	female	30 to 39 years	5	primary	1.5	parent
H	female	40 to 49 years	1	nursery	2	parent
I	female	50 to 59 years	6	primary	8mths	parent/staff**
J	female	30 to 39 years	6	primary	2	community
K	female	40 to 49 years	7	secondary	4	parent
L	male	40 to 49 years	1	primary	1	parent

*Local Authority; ** first then second role as governor, years relates to time in second role*
Figure 1: Profile of governors participating in BSG project

With regards to age, most of the female governors in the overall and participant sample were aged between 40 and 49, followed by 30 to 39 years of age. While the sample is far too small to draw any specific conclusions, it is worth noting that by comparison the male governors tended to be within the youngest or eldest age groups.

Reasons for becoming a school governor

Participants were asked about their reasons for becoming a school governor. The most commonly sited reason was having school-aged children. Governing was seen as providing a means of increasing and developing an understanding of the education system within their child's school and therefore of enabling them to better support and educate their child.

> My daughter, when she started primary school, I felt for purely selfish reasons, I felt she had got to the age of four or five a confident happy enthusiastic child and I really wanted to make sure she stayed that way. That is part of it and I wanted to be involved in the school to see that everything is okay for her but also there was that curiosity about what goes on behind the staff room (…) We all have our own reasons for being on it [the governing body] and mine was literally quite selfish. It wasn't to do what's best for society; it was to do better for my kid! *Governor G, female*

In many instances this desire to be better positioned to understand the system was also fuelled by negative experiences that had directly affected their older children or those currently attending school as well as being informed by a deeper concern and awareness of the problems faced by Black children in British schools. Governor B makes this point specifically in relation to Black boys:

> Ok I have three children; two of them are boys. The experience of my first son I did not want my second son to go through. I know that putting yourself strategically in a certain place may help the buffer and so that was my plan. My plan was to make sure that I was in a decision-making place

> so that I could indirectly help my son as well as help other boys, particularly Black boys because I was aware of what they were going through and the discrimination. And so first and foremost it was really around the discrimination faced by Black boys in school. *Governor B, female*

Concern about the educational experiences and situation affecting Black pupils was not limited to those governors with children. Other participants also identified this as one of their reasons for applying to the role although the particular weight they attributed to this as the most salient motive varied. One male respondent (Governor A), for example, described his reasons for becoming a governor as related to a desire to contribute to the local community in which he lived and in which he did not feel involved as well as being linked to a concern that governing bodies did not have sufficient representation of individuals from Black and minority ethnic groups.

It may also be the case that the reasons for becoming a governor are shaped by social class (discussed further on page 18). Both Governor A and J defined themselves as being particularly privileged in both their schooling and current occupations and while they mentioned an awareness of and some concern about issues pertaining to ethnicity, they tended to place emphasis on their professional skills (e.g. financial and legal knowledge) and the mindset that they were able to bring to the board and cited these high in their list of reasons for becoming a governor as compared with other governors.

Joining process

The ways in which participants learnt about governing and governor vacancies tended to vary although for two-thirds of the interviewed sample, the school had initiated the recruitment drive. For example, some participants applied for the role after reading about governor vacancies in school newsletters and others had been directly approached by the head as part of a wider commitment on the part of the school to increase parental participation in schooling and also to improve the representation of governors from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

Three participants became governors as a result of their own research and one of these had applied via the School Governors' One Stop Shop (SGOSS)[7]. Another participant had both been made aware of school governing and applied via the SGOSS, which had set up a temporary marketing stand at her workplace. Both governors who applied through the One Stop Shop described the usefulness of the literature it provided and the advantages of being able to speak with One Stop staff about what was entailed in governing. However, both commented on the length of time after having submitted their application that it took to hear from the charity about vacancies. One governor expressed frustration at this perceived inefficiency whereas the time delay provided the other with the opportunity to become accustomed to the idea of becoming a governor.

Only two governors mentioned the interview process, remarking on the unexpected formality of the situation. Governor B found six interviewers excessive and that the number did little to make her feel comfortable. Governor B found the notion of an interview per se "daunting" especially in the context of having volunteered for the role.

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[7] The School Governors' One Stop Shop was set up as part of the school leadership strand of Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiative in 1999. It seeks to increase the number of governors with transferable management skills and improve the recruitment of governors in areas where they are most lacking.   (see www.sgoss.org.uk/aboutus.htm accessed August 2006)

School governor role

This section focuses on participants' role and responsibilities as school governors and examines committee membership and the skills and experiences that individuals bring to the governing role. Quite often participants did not have a clear idea of the role and responsibilities of school governors neither prior to nor at the time of applying, this only becoming apparent once they had received training and been in post for several months.

Committee membership

Most governors had accepted or volunteered for additional responsibilities beyond membership to the main governing board, which included being part of the curriculum, staff pay review and staff recruitment committees. Others were also members of committees charged with improving home-school relations and representing pupils' views. Two governors also acted as mentor (or "buddy") governors with special responsibility for supporting those who had newly joined the board. Only one governor said he had no extra commitment beyond the main membership because he wanted to cover all aspects of the training programme offered by the local authority before accepting such responsibility.

Skills and experience

Participants had a range of both professional and life or personal experiences that they felt contributed to their work as a school governor. Professionally, participants described skills acquired through occupations such as law, management consultancy, human resources, teaching, the media and race equality that enabled them to contribute directly to areas such as finance, recruitment and the curriculum as well as providing them with the confidence and skills to work as part of a team and to engage in processes of debating and decision-making. Governors cited good interpersonal skills and, in one case, a knowledge of the education system in another country as useful life and personal experiences that they brought to the governing body.

Some participants also highlighted the importance of living locally as this both facilitated an understanding of the community in which the school was located and was seen to furnish them with a degree of credibility with parents whose children attended the school and the young people themselves.

Description of governing body

Individual knowledge of issues such as number and type of governor vacancies was scarce and varied across the group. Bodies were largely described as being balanced in terms of gender and as being comprised of individuals from a range of professional backgrounds. Governor D, highlighted the difference between his (between 20 and 29 years) age and those of other governors both on his board and at forums and external meetings as sometimes presenting a challenge as he attempted to encourage others to appreciate a different, younger perspective to the matters under discussion.

Descriptions of governing bodies with regards to ethnicity revealed that four participants felt that their board was mixed ethnically. One, however, disregarded ethnicity as unimportant insisting that:

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> We don't look at colour anymore (…). We look at ourselves to be one. It is just for the interest of the pupils, both Black and white because all we want is for them to be great in this society and achieve greatness and that is the real way we do our best. *Governor L, male*

Another was a governor in a faith school in a predominantly white borough and this was reflected in the governing body of which she was part. The remaining six participants felt that their governing bodies were not mixed ethnically and were not representative of the wider pupil population although specific interpretations and perception of this also varied. For example, while Governor A saw this as a problem, he attributed the mainly white governing body to the historical profile of the area and, to what he described as the lack of "engagement" on the part of Asian and Black parents.   For Governor C, while she viewed the presence of only three Black governors on her board as low, she also regarded it as "quite well represented" considering the difficulties in recruiting governors at a special school.

Interactions with other governors

This section begins by examining participants' perception of and approach to meetings followed by a broader consideration of interpersonal dynamics amongst governors including the ways in which matters concerning race and ethnicity are addressed by the board.

Perspective towards meetings

Three governors spoke of the difficulties they encountered when they first joined their boards in terms of feeling unsupported and also of being confused during meetings by the references to educational terms and acronyms that were not always explained. Experiences at these initial stages not only contributed to a feeling of isolation but also triggered thoughts about leaving the post:

> Governing body meetings are quite technical and if you are sitting there and don't know everything that is going on (…) if you are not clued into what is going on then half of it is just flying straight over my head. I am quite glad they explained that in the introduction course that I went on - on being a governor. They said give yourself about a year and it's true for like the first three meetings I am just like acronyms are being thrown everywhere and yes the Chair does try and explain. Don't get me wrong they do explain: this is what this stands for and all that, but it is still so much information which is thrown at you that if you come in then you just get really daunted at the start. It is very easy to be like let me just give this up now while I still have the chance. *Governor D, male*

Many participants spoke of adopting a specific approach in meetings in order to ensure their views were heard and their objectives also continued to be met. Participants spoke of the importance of being proactive and assertive, of the need to question and challenge the status quo:

> …there are times when I can be very much like when you won't let go - a terrier - when you won't let go and I will keep asking the question until someone answers or until someone says "well, look, we don't know but we will find out and come back." So I think you've got to be able to stand up and challenge and if you don't understand something, say you don't understand. (…). Be prepared to challenge, be prepared to listen and ask questions and be committed and to follow up. If you've challenged something before and they've said, "I'll come back to you", don't let it slide, go back and ask the question and at the same time be supportive … *Governor K, female*

Participants stressed the importance of not being dissuaded by attempts to dismiss or defer their queries and observations. While it was accepted that not all governors might possess the confidence to be expressive and vocal in the ways suggested, these characteristics were nonetheless regarded as central to the role of the effective governor and, additionally, were seen as a way of ensuring their personal objectives and concerns, that had originally led to their becoming governors (see Reasons for becoming a school governor, page 13), were addressed.

<u>Interpersonal relationships</u>

Two thirds of the participants described specific instances of difficult or negative experiences with their co-governors. These included complaints about meetings being monopolised by one individual or "cliques" and reports of being intentionally ignored. For example, one governor gave an account of a headteacher and another of a long-standing chairperson both of whom were perceived as so fixed in their beliefs and attitudes that they were unwilling to entertain debates that broached subjects with which they did not personally agree. As one governor explained:

> …it's very intimidating what's going on here. It's not OK that these people [other governors] are either shouted down or dismissed. [It is] particularly the chair, who's an old lady who's from a private school background - used to teach science and maths and in many, many, many ways she's a grandparent now - she controls. She's the chair. She's pretty much there. If she doesn't like what you're saying she'll dismiss it out of hand. [For example] she had no time for the issue of healthy eating. She sees it as us trying to dictate to parents about what they should and shouldn't eat. *Governor E, female*

This governor continued to talk about the opposition that the chair presented about healthy eating despite strong support for the campaign from school parents themselves, explaining that the general approach at meetings was "not about collaboration or liaising (…). It's very much they will listen to us." Similar sentiments were expressed by Governor D who voiced his frustration at feeling as though others were not listening to his views. He also complained that certain governors presided over meetings discussing issues tangential to the matters at hand. Both experiences made him consider resigning from his post. Governor B described how, when faced by what she perceived as persistent disregard for her views, she attempted to address this:

> There was also the time when I felt I needed to blatantly say that I feel you are not listening when I talk. I have given in accordance to you when you speak and I listen and take your views and yet when I speak you are not listening because I can see your body language and the way your eyes go. And you know I think… I would say something and it would just go round a couple of people and then it is like nobody heard it and then another person says it and its like, 'oh yes that's a good idea'. I said, 'well I've just said it and so it is like I am speaking a different language here'. Do you understand? And so it is about listening and hearing and listening and I just believe here that the ear is closed down and mind is closed down whenever certain people [speak]. *Governor B, female*

Governors J and Q also faced a similar kind of exclusion as that experienced by Governors N and D. These governors provided accounts of when others acted as part of "cliques" or "factions" in which they worked collectively towards a joint goal from which they and others were excluded. Governor E, for example, spoke of the tensions between the "little community of parents" from white middle class backgrounds and governors from white working class backgrounds that came to a particular climax when an individual from a white working class

background did not gain a place on the governing body. Governor E also explained that she and several other governors had never had a conversation with one another, despite their having sat next to one another at meetings and despite her having been part of the governing body for three years. While she mentioned that she now planned to raise the importance of formally introducing newcomers at the next governors' meeting she also was worried that the lack of conversation and communication was racialised and could be attributed to a "fear and ignorance" about "dealing with minorities".

For Governor J, poor interpersonal relationships manifested themselves in terms of communal apathy from a section of the governing body as they accepted unsatisfactory answers or even the lack of answers to questions and did not refute information that was presented to them. The frequent complaint about the lack of or poor communication amongst school governors sometimes resulted in important information not being shared:

> Well the challenge the other Chair[8] had is (*sic*) around communication. I mean I did have a bit of hefty fists at one point because our head for 8 years - I found out that he was leaving when my daughter told me because she had heard it in assembly! And I felt well I am a governor and I should know about this and I just didn't know and I thought that was an issue around communication and the information we know and share. *Governor G, female*

It is difficult to attribute the problems discussed here solely to participants' ethnicity. As Governor E indicated, tensions also are evident along social class lines and some problems may be reflective of the politics of group behaviour.

The role of ethnicity

This section examines the reactions governors encountered when they raised the topic of 'race' and ethnicity in relation to the composition of the governing body or pupils' achievement and then considers participants' views on the extent they feel their ethnicity shapes their role as a school governor.

<u>Ethnicity and education</u>

Where governors mentioned how the governing body handled the topic of ethnicity and race equality, reports were not positive. Governor A reported the low representation of governors from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds on his governing body and remarked that it was not a subject that had been discussed at meetings because of the focus on other issues. When pressed, he explained that the impetus for participating had to come from individuals themselves:

> I suppose that has more to do with the fact that although a lot of the pupils there are from predominantly Asian background you know their parents just don't seem that… we are trying and it is improving but are they really interested in the school? Do they really feel they should put their time into it? The answer is probably no at the moment. You know trying to get them to become governors, which is a step further is obviously difficult. (…) And I am not saying this is a sort of Asian issue I think it is probably a national issue. *Governor A, male*

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[8] Governor G was about to take up the role of Chair.

While it was not clear whether his co-governors shared his views about the lack of "engagement" on the part of certain parents, Governor A does not consider the factors that might deter these parents from participating in school life nor what the governing body might do differently to help attract them. His position may well be influenced by his own private schooling experiences where he reported that parents actively sought membership of Parent Teacher Associations and where membership of the governing body was much contested and steeped in status and prestige.

When she raised the question of the ethnic group representation of governors with her board, Governor E spoke of being met by a "deafening silence" both during her statement and after it, which she interpreted as partly due to embarrassment and partly due to a disregard for or an "indifference" about the issue. Further she, like Governor B, described the difficulties she encountered when asking questions about the achievements and experiences of pupils from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, sometimes being confronted with what they perceived as a resistance to engage meaningfully in debate:

> You know if I saw statistics I would want to know can you explain why that is. Why is this teacher… because what they were doing was making sure that… they started to monitor the teachers that were excluding or using a room (…). Any child that gets sent to that room they have been excluded from class. And I wanted to know if as well as the child was being sent to that room I wanted to know if there was a particular teacher that was sending the child to that room. And I also wanted to know what training was in store for those teachers. If a teacher's name kept coming up, if it was an over-representation of Black boys being sent by those particular teachers. Do you have any training provided for that teacher because it can't always be about the children? You have also got to look at the teacher? And so those questions I would ask I would get a bit deep and ask those questions. Sometimes they like it and sometimes they don't. *Governor B, female*

The role of participants' ethnicity

Participants were asked about the extent to which they felt their ethnicity contributed to their role as a school governor. While all governors clearly defined themselves in terms of being Black of African or African Caribbean heritage[9] the degree to which individuals saw this as a salient feature of their identity and their role as governor varied considerably. For example, some governors saw their ethnicity as incidental to their role, prioritising instead the skills and experiences that they felt bore more significance to their work:

> …the way I always think is I'm a governor first and then I'm Black afterwards. I know that's not how some people think of it but for me, that's how I think of it. I'm a governor first and then "oh, she's Black". So I want people to know me for my governance and my fairness and my input and then say, "oh, by the way she's Black" rather than "oh, she's Black". It won't be "[own name] our Black governor". It'll be "[own name] the governor and by the way, she's a Black ethnic minority". You know, so it shouldn't matter. What should matter is the contribution you make as a governor and being Black is a bonus. *Governor K, female*

This perspective differed somewhat to that of Governor C who described herself in opposite terms as Black first and a governor second since, she explained "they [referring to those from white communities] see colour first", indicating that her view about her ethnicity is somewhat

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[9] As defined in the invitation to participate in the project.

formulated in response to the perceptions of white mainstream society. Interestingly, Governor K felt that her personal commitment to fairness and her contribution to the governing body would outweigh any attention paid to her ethnicity. While this might be true in some cases, it may also indicate a larger idealistic perception that views about ethnicity play little role in society; an outlook shared by Governor L:

> I think as a Black governor, what you like to bring in to the system… what I would like to bring into the system, whether Black or white, it doesn't really matter. What we are talking about is not about Black or white it is about we should be treated equally, that is all. If you look at my colour and see this one is already failing, test me and see. Give me the chance. I don't want to be pitied. It is not about being pitied. It is not about sympathy. It is about chance. I believe that what we should bring in is that we should let people know it is not Black people. We don't need pity, or sympathy. We need equality. We need to be tested. Sometimes you are not tested, you have already failed. *Governor L, male*

Here, Governor L shares some of the complexities around identity and race equality. While he identifies as a "Black governor" and accepts the existence of racial discrimination (that some Black people may be prejudged as failures), he simultaneously rejects the emphasis placed on the role of his ethnicity as a Black person arguing that all governors, Black or white should be advocating an approach based on equality. While Governor G shared this view to an extent she was of the opinion that her presence, along with that of other Black governors, meant that she was able to engage in "those really honest discussions about race and racism", a position not readily available to white counterparts:

> Some white people can have them [honest discussions about race and racism] because they are passionate about race equality and things like you know David Gillborn[10] and those people are still quite few and far between that have felt they had to earn their credibility and still get challenged by Black people despite the fact they have banged on about inequality for years and years.
> *Governor G, female*

While acknowledging that some individuals within the white community are advocates of race equality, despite being viewed with some suspicion by individuals from the Black community, Governor G maintained that white people largely reacted unhelpfully to discussions about racism responding with embarrassment, by "shutting down" or dismissing the accusations or concerns as "silly". While outlining the benefits of her presence as a Black governor, she also saw this as a "burden", as "feeling that you have to represent every non-white view in the whole of that school". Governor B, in comparison saw this as significant to influencing the discussions that other governors would initiate were she not present:

> Yeah I mean yes me being Black and powerful I see that as a very positive thing and I think just my presence alone may make some of the governors think oh yes we must make sure we do certain things. If you are not in the room, if you don't have that presence in the room when they are making all these decisions it can easily get missed because that might not be part of their value system, you know. It might not be on their agenda because on the agenda should be things that they checklist, they should make sure, but if the issues around Black and ethnic minority are not on their agenda then they won't discuss it and they won't see a way to incorporate into the school. *Governor B, female*

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[10] David Gillborn is a white Professor of Education, known for his work examining 'race'/ethnicity and social class inequalities in the British education system.

Other interviewed governors felt that their ethnicity played a variable role in shaping the kind of issues they presented to the governing body. In other words, there were some situations where being Black was considered pertinent to the matters under discussion or directly fuelled a particular concern for the educational experiences of Black children but remained incidental to others. As Governor J explained:

> Being Black I think as a Black governor I bring my passion for my Black children but my passion for my Black children is my passion for all children regardless of what ethnic background they are from. To me if I was to say honestly I am a governor because I want to be a governor and not because I want to be a Black governor. I don't think that my race would change any of the comments I have made or any of the input I have given to that governing body. *Governor J, female*

Some participants argued that while their ethnicity had some significance to their work, for example in being on exclusion panels and being able to relate and talk to young pupils from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, other aspects of their identity were more relevant on other occasions:

> Sometimes it's more my age or sometimes its more about the fact that I grew up and I live in the borough you know. I still have lots of people who say you don't live in the borough you don't sound like you live in the borough. I do live in the borough I was born down the street how I talk doesn't change anything about me you know. Everything I can do you can do and do even more because there are more opportunities for you now than there are for me. And so sometimes it all depends on who is in front of you. *Governor D, male*

Governor A emphasised the role of social class as more of a salient issue with regards to his identity and the ways in which he considered that it shaped societal expectations of different groups:

> …just because we are from different communities and we do different things and I work in the City and I might earn a lot more money we are still part of the same community because I am interested in your community as well. And you know I want you to be interested in mine and understand where I come from and where you come from. And I put that beyond like ethnic minorities or anything. I just think that is important in terms of the different levels of social strata because unfortunately in this country you know there are vast differences in people's expectations or the amount they earn. Well it is all done on the amount of money you earn and people have different opportunities to earn different amounts of money. *Governor A, male*

While ethnicity played some role in affecting what these governors felt they contributed to the governing process it is evident that not only did individuals' personal discourses about their own ethnicity vary but that the way in which ethnicity was 'played out' was also contextual and closely related to the salience of other identity factors such as age and social class.

Advantages of governing

Participants were asked about what they enjoyed about governing and to provide examples of any key achievements or rewarding moments. Being part of the school environment and having made new friends or met new people featured highly in the responses of eight of the school governors. Governor K, for example, enthused about how much she really enjoyed being a governor, that the school made her feel welcome and had even bought her a mug that was kept in the staff room. Another governor observed:

> …there are people on the board that have become friends that I wouldn't have met if I hadn't joined the board of governors. People that are just really nice people. That has been a positive that I wasn't expecting, to make new friends. *Governor C, female*

At least two governors mentioned that it was specifically meeting people from backgrounds different from their own that they found a new and positive learning experience. By contrast Governor E had initially found the experience of governing isolating and had helped establish an extended network of Black governors and parents to whom she could turn for educational advice and support, and who she felt would share an understanding of her experiences as a Black person. Yet others described the joy of being more intimately involved in school life and the pleasure they took from learning about the education system or the different projects and activities in which the pupils were involved. One governor in particular emphasised the personal satisfaction she gained from working with the children in her primary school.

Governors H and Y also spoke explicitly about the "glow" of satisfaction they felt from being able to simply contribute to a positive venture, with Governor H expressing this in terms of "giving something back for my years of education".

Rewarding experiences tended to be those where governors had been able to make use of particular skills or area of expertise to contribute to the positive outcome of a school related objective or area of concern. For Governor A this meant being able to utilise legal and financial expertise to lead on the development of the bid for the new school building. For Governor E it was initiating and leading on the development of an evening for parents from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds that was of personal significance, especially since the school had previously complained of difficulties in engaging parents from these backgrounds. A couple of governors described the sense of accomplishment they felt having been part of the interview panel when recruiting new teaching or senior staff. Governors N and W described the enthusiasm gleaned from watching the pupils develop, with Governor D remarking:

> …what I love is we have prize giving at assemblies at the end of every term and to just shake the hands of the pupils as they come and collect the awards and just seeing the people who come up and [thinking] I remember the first term you came and collected something. You know just getting more awards and more certificates that is what encourages me to know that yes we are doing the right thing. *Governor D, male*

One governor, however, admitted to struggling to recall a key moment of achievement during her term of office conceding that most of her time and energy had been focused on trying to influence the shape and direction of the governor meetings in relation to issues around Black children.

Negative aspects of governing

Some of the negative aspects of school governing relating to how issues surrounding race and ethnicity are handled by the governing board and interpersonal dynamics were discussed above. In addition, this section considers the concerns about the length of meetings; the amount of paperwork and pay as well as particular key challenges faced by governors.

Time commitment

One of the most common complaints about being a school governor, voiced by over two-thirds of the participants was the amount of time that it consumed. First, many meetings were regarded as unnecessarily long or scheduled at inconvenient times of the day with little consideration of individual commitments and responsibilities:

> …governors have to come to meetings in the evening and meetings [are] from 6.30 to 10 having already been at work from 7 in the morning. It is quite draining. *Governor J*

Governor E, remarking on her own time and energy constraints as a lone mother of two young children, highlighted how differences in life circumstances impacted not on commitment and desire to remain involved in the work of the governing body but on what individuals might be able to physically and logistically offer:

> I don't have that amount of time as these individuals have had because all of them don't work. They're all what some people might term yummy mummy types. They have all the time in the world because if their husband isn't providing it then their trust fund is. So they have the luxury and I see it as a luxury… I'd love the luxury to not work; to spend my time researching about healthy eating. It's lovely. I'd love to do that and picking up Johnny and Jemima first thing in the morning and last thing in the evening and being in on every PTA and so forth. It's wonderful. *Governor E, female*

Some governing bodies had addressed problems with the duration of meetings by introducing more meetings, which were shorter in length, or by referring some matters for discussion to separate subcommittees.

Paperwork

While the length of meetings and the amount of time individuals could allocate to carry out background research for those meetings was cited as a problem it was further exacerbated, participants explained, by amount of paper work and reading that was required of them. Governor D recalled how he simply "wasn't prepared" for the "huge bundles" that arrived in the post and noted how he often found the arrival of "the brown envelope" "scary". He also reflected that the amount of reading required as part of the role of school governor might discourage those with English as an Additional Language from applying.

Pay

Three governors also complained about the fact that governing remained an unpaid role despite the amount of commitment that it required although a fourth governor argued that while the offer of payment might attract more people into governing it might serve to attract those not genuinely committed to education and the requirements of the role.

Challenges

Participants identified a range of issues that they felt had represented a personal challenge during their time as a governor. Two spoke of the challenge they felt when they realised just how accountable they were as governors for various aspects of the management of the school.

Governor K had found the prospect of a forthcoming Ofsted inspection daunting, fearing the nature of questions and manner in which they may have been asked. Another, Governor A, detailed the personal worry he experienced at struggling to manage the school's very limited finances and any proposed cutbacks that he might have had to suggest. The initial meetings where he had been attempting to "make sense of it all", presented a particular challenge for Governor D. Governor H described the sense of isolation she had felt attending a governors' forum within the borough; an issue echoed by Governor E but which had been addressed by the setting up of a Black Governors Group within the borough in which she had taken an active role (described earlier).

Improving recruitment

This section considers why participants feel there is a shortage of Black school governors and then outlines the ways in which their recruitment might be improved. Although some of the reasons and recommendations may apply equally to other ethnic groups there are several that are specific to the experiences of individuals from Black African and African Caribbean backgrounds.

Reasons for shortage of Black school governors

People within the Black community were largely judged to be committed to education with one governor citing the large numbers of Black parents attending the annual London Schools and the Black Child conference[11] to exemplify her point. While there were variations in participants' responses to this subject, there were five key reasons that were considered to hinder more people becoming governors, four of which were specific to individuals from Black backgrounds:

1   *Lack of awareness*
    Participants felt that both the wider population and those from Black communities were unaware of the existence of school governors per se and, even where there was awareness, recruitment was felt to be limited because of a lack of knowledge about the role and its responsibilities.

2   *Personal commitments*
    There was also a perception that personal circumstances might limit the amount of time individuals could spare for a time-consuming voluntary activity such as governing. This was seen, in some cases, to be an issue particularly pertinent to those from Black communities who, according to Governor L, might be "struggling (…) to make ends meet and to feed their family" or, as was argued by Governors Q and X, for those who were lone working mothers.

3   *Negative experiences of the education system and/or society*
    Two governors (B and L) suggested that Black people might feel intimidated by the prospect of joining a group with whose dynamics and politics they were not familiar. Governor A elucidated that for young Black people this might be due to their lack of self-esteem compared with the rest of society, stemming from experiences of institutionalised racism. He felt that his own presence as a Black school governor might encourage more Black people to apply although concerns about being the only Black person on the

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[11] Initiated by Diane Abbott MP.

governing body was a deterrent for others. Governor D referred to the experiences of the "older [Black] generation" highlighting the negative school experiences of her contemporaries being incorrectly placed, for example, in "subnormal schools" and the "suffering" they had endured as a result.

4   Views of governing bodies
Increased participation of Black school governors was also considered to be hindered by a perception that governing bodies are not comprised of individuals from similar social and ethnic group backgrounds:

> … this is what white middle class people do and you don't see yourself as white middle class and so why would you want to jump into that group? People are not necessarily thinking, "I need to be involved because my child has been affected or I can make a difference" or "I would be welcomed". You might automatically think you might turn up and they will be thinking, "Where are you going?" "You don't look like you belong here". So there are all those barriers to break down I would imagine. If you have been in an environment that you are not really exposed to that, you might automatically screen yourself out. *Governor C, female*

Governor I recalled the respect older Black generations had for those in positions of authority, such as teachers, whom they considered it discourteous to challenge and question which might as a result reduce their likelihood of joining a governing body where such attitudes of questioning are required.

5   Lack of cultural awareness amongst existing governing bodies
Governor H argued that a major hindrance was that existing white school governors did not "know how to interact with Black people" and therefore did not approach and invite them to become governors. This may, in part, relate to their experiences being limited to mainly white areas and/or a lack of engagement with and awareness of culturally diverse communities.

Improving recruitment

Recommendations for improving recruitment centred primarily on methods to increase awareness of the existence of, and the role and responsibilities of, school governors. Almost fifty percent of the governors suggested a national, government-led campaign via posters, television advertisements and notices in national and local press some of which would specifically target the media sources traditionally accessed by those from Black and minority ethnic communities. Participants proposed a range of school and government led initiatives that included setting up mini-workshops, publishing literature to highlight the benefits of governing and inviting individuals already involved in community-related work (such as policemen, local councillors and church groups) to become governors.

Some participants advised addressing the image and profile of school governing so that it was viewed as a duty to society on a par with jury service. This raised profile would, it was argued, also encourage employers across all sectors to regard governing more favourably and be more willing to grant employees time for reading and to attend meetings.

Participants also suggested that schools and existing governors could do much more to address the problems around recruitment, which included highlighting the achievements of existing

school governors and ensuring their presence at school events. Some participants also suggested that they could act as governor advocates, encouraging friends and families to sign up.

A full list of suggestions aimed at improving recruitment is provided in Figure 2. All recommendations will have some relevance to Black school governors but those aimed specifically at this group are highlighted in green.

Recommendations for improving recruitment

Government
- National advertising campaign (television, national & local press)

- Target key media sources for BME community (The Voice newspaper, radio stations, professional and networking groups; websites)

- Target FTSE companies to increase participation of professional groups

- Target Black community groups, churches, Black workers' associations

- Raise profile/status of school governing perhaps by offering yearly governing awards for particular achievements; highlight governor responsibilities and skills in advertising campaigns

- Challenge existing image of school governing (as white & middle class)

- Offer nominal payment to governors for their time

- Provide allocated funding to local authorities/schools for governor expenses

- Set up governor recruitment roadshows in culturally diverse areas

- Support the publication of national statistics on school governors (including ethnicity)

School/Existing governors
- Write to parents emphasising importance of contribution of different ethnic groups to school's development and decision-making processes

- Hold mini-workshops to explain governing and application process

- Ensure presence of Black governors at school events to challenge white, middle class image of body

- Highlight achievements of governors in school correspondence to draw attention to their responsibilities and contributions

- Distribute "How to become a school governor" style leaflets

- Invite applications for governors when parents visit school, emphasize that keen to involve parents from wide range of ethnic backgrounds

- Be more sensitive to the commitments of different groups of governors (e.g. work, childcare commitments); reconsider scheduling of meetings & offer of expenses

- Monitor the ethnicity of existing governing boards to better identify where to target recruitment drives and support

Figure 2: Recommendations for improving recruitment of (Black) governors

Improving Retention

Participants had fewer explicit ideas about how to improve the retention of existing school governors generally or, of those from Black backgrounds. However, a number of suggestions can again be inferred from participants' earlier comments about the disadvantages of school governing. Recommendations include the introduction of exit interviews or anonymised questionnaires where individuals could cite the reasons for resigning if doing so before the end of the standard four-year term of office.   As part of this, it would also be useful to monitor information such as the participant's ethnicity, age and gender that could be analysed at school, local and national levels to determine whether certain groups are more likely to leave than others and to encourage the governing body to reflect on the extent to which its internal practices are inclusive.

Governor D and Governor C had described the difficulties of the initial meetings and provided accounts of feeling unclear about the process and what might be required of them. This may have been addressed through the presence of mentor or "buddy" governors with the special remit to support new governors and explain issues where there had not been time to do so in the main meetings. Governor E also stressed the importance of support beyond the governing body itself, in the form of a Black governors' group:

> There has to be a safe place for us to go, where we feel safe, where we feel that we can … I believe in the talk and cure. You've got to have a space where we can go and talk and not just talk out our issues, but talk them in a way that we can, if you like, express culturally what we're going through, you know, the subtleties. And I will use the R word - the subtleties of racism - even if it's not conscious, part of the conscious manoeuvre on the part of those individuals because half the time they don't even realise it. *Governor E, female*

While a number of Black governors' groups exist in different local authorities, it might be helpful if these groups were connected through a wider network at regional or national level to facilitate the sharing of ideas and solutions to common problems.

In addition, the section on the role of ethnicity revealed some tensions and difficulties about the readiness of some governing bodies to engage with issues around either the representation of their own boards or general school-related matters concerning race equality. This relates to the point that a lack of cultural awareness of white school governors might hinder some individuals from Black communities from becoming school governors and may also affect the retention of existing Black school governors. Governing bodies may require an improved understanding of the historical and contemporary significance of race equality within education and the related issues of achievement, school exclusions and special educational needs so that they are more likely to recognise the significance of with these issues when raised and better address them.

Figure 3 lists recommendations for improving retention which, as with those concerning recruitment may be applicable to the wider governor group as well as to Black school governors in particular. Key suggestions relevant to Black school governors are highlighted in green.

Recommendations for improving retention

Local Authority

- To offer exit interviews/anonymised questionnaires; responses to be monitored by ethnicity, age, gender

- Encourage use of mentor/"buddy" governors to support governors in early stages of their governance

- Introduce shadowing scheme (for potential/interested individuals to learn about governing)

- Support the development and co-ordination of Black support groups (offer spaces for meetings; set up email lists; mention in governor correspondence)

- Ensure all governing bodies understand importance of: race/ethnicity in schooling debates (historical and contemporary issues); ethnic group percentages in local and national population; areas of settlement/location and why to offer context to role of race/ethnicity in school. Offer in-school sessions to each body.

Governing body

- Schedule meetings at times convenient to all individuals

- Keep to a time limit for meetings

- Share paperwork & responsibility (e.g. via subcommittees)

- Encourage new governors to participate in "New to Governor" (or equivalent) training before first scheduled meeting

- Acknowledge the contributions of governors

- Offer provision for childcare or childcare expenses

Figure 3: Recommendations for improving the retention of (Black) school governors

Future plans

Of the eight governors who were sure about their future plans, Governors D and L had considered resigning. Governor B felt she could no longer spare the time and had already sent the Chair her letter of resignation. While she appeared to be resolved in her decision she remarked that she was nonetheless surprised that no-one had contacted her to discuss her departure considering the length of time she had been part of the board. Governor L wanted to leave because he was dissatisfied with the favouritism the Chair appeared to show to certain governors and the way other governors were excluded from some of the decision-making. However, he had been convinced to continue another term as a result of intervention by the headteacher.

Governor A was committed to seeing the school building project to fruition and while he wanted to renew his term wanted to do so on a short-term basis. Although keen to renew his term, Governor D also was concerned about working more directly with young people and was considering mentoring as an alternative voluntary position. The remaining four governors planned to continue and renew their term of office.

Discussion

This report has examined the experiences of a small sample of Black school governors and discussed their views from the point at which they decided to become governors to their future plans. The following section summarises and discusses some of the key findings.

Overview

Existing evidence regarding the number of Black and minority ethnic school governors in schools is poor but where available, suggests that there are at least twice as many pupils from these backgrounds in schools as school governors. This research has examined the experiences of a sample of Black school governors in London with a view to identifying factors that might support their increased recruitment and retention to governing boards.

Reasons for becoming a school governor

While there was often no single reason for choosing to become a school governor, participants most commonly did so because they had children in the school and wanted to gain an increased understanding of the education system to enable them to better support their child's schooling. Sometimes this was informed by a particular concern about the experiences of Black children within the British education system and a desire to make a difference for future generations. Governors who did not have children were also keen to improve their understanding of the education system and regarded governing as a way of contributing to the local (and/or Black) community and a way of utilising their professional and life skills. It is difficult to know whether these reasons are specific to Black school governors as compared with other minority ethnic groups or the white majority group. It is highly likely that Black governors (many of whom were parents) are particularly inspired and concerned to volunteer due to the ongoing problems faced predominantly by Black pupils within the British education system.

Advantages to governing

Governing offered participants a way of meeting people beyond their traditional social networks. It allowed them to become involved in school life and establish closer relationships with pupils, staff and (other) parents. Some participants spoke of the joy they gained from seeing pupils achieve or knowing that they had contributed to an area of the school's development. Governing also offered the personal satisfaction of using skills and giving something back to the community.

Disadvantages to governing

Participants listed the length and timing of meetings and the quantity of paperwork amongst the main disadvantages to governing. Although not listed as a specific disadvantage in every case, participants also complained about the interpersonal dynamics and politics they had to endure as a member of the governing body. Most frequent concerns centred on the exclusionary practices of "cliques" or "factions" on the body and the monopolising tendencies (mainly though not exclusively) of headteachers and chairpersons committed to pursuing their own agenda, to the disregard of others.

Some governors also described the uncooperative and disinterested attitudes they encountered when they raised matters concerning race and ethnicity both in respect to the representativeness of the governing body itself and in relation to the achievement and experiences of pupils from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

The role of ethnicity

While participants in the study identified as Black of African or African Caribbean heritage in line with the prerequisites of email request for participants, the ways they perceived their ethnicity as being the intrinsic part of their identity, their views and perspectives varied considerably across the group. Notably some described themselves and wanted to be seen as a governor first, known for their skills and values, and regarded their ethnicity as incidental to their role. For others, their ethnicity was more pertinent to their identity and in some cases shaped their perception of their role on the governing body as committed to highlighting the importance of issues around race equality and the experiences of pupils from Black (and in some cases minority ethnic) backgrounds.

Importantly, there were also other identity constructs beyond ethnicity, such as age and social class which also contributed to and shaped individual concerns and ways of thinking.

Reasons for the shortage of Black school governors

Participants felt that a general lack of awareness of the existence of and the role and responsibilities of school governance was a key factor relating to the shortage of governors. However, some participants also voiced concerns about particular factors affecting the Black community such as work and time commitments and additional childcare concerns for families led by a lone parent.

Recruitment and retention

Some of the recommendations for addressing the recruitment and retention (see Figures 2 & 3) of Black school governors can also be related to other ethnic groups. Approximately two-thirds of the participants recommended a government recruitment drive to address the current number of governor vacancies. They also suggested targeting media avenues traditionally accessed by those from Black and minority ethnic communities as well as venues such as churches, Black workers' groups and youth centres.

A few felt that the image of school governing as traditionally white and middle class needed to be dispelled and the benefits of governing highlighted.

Further considerations and future research

While this report makes specific recommendations regarding the improved recruitment and retention of Black school governors clearly, many of the findings in this report may reflect the views of governors from a range of ethnic groups. No attempt has been made to infer the ethnicity of these participants as the sole explanatory factor in their experiences where they themselves did not identify it as important. While the study is based on a small, unrepresentative sample the following are made as important considerations and as possible suggestions for future research:

1   The findings suggest a hesitance amongst some governing bodies to engage with matters surrounding race and ethnicity despite the recommendations of the amended Race Relations Act (CRE, 2002).

2   Governing bodies may not recognise the importance of reflecting how they engage with the topic of 'race' and ethnicity as a board and the way in which this may affect governors from Black (and minority ethnic) backgrounds.

3   While the proportional representation of governors from Black African and Caribbean backgrounds on school governing boards is important, this research indicates a diversity of views and experiences amongst the group of Black participants involved in this study and highlights the need to consider the role of additional constructs such as age and social class in shaping individual perception and identity.

4   This research has focused on the views of a small number of governors from across seven local authorities in London. It would be useful to extend and replicate the study to take account of the views of Black governors from suburban areas and other cities across England[12].

5   Some governors in this research made particular reference to supporting the "Black community" or being especially concerned with the schooling of Black pupils as well as detailing their difficulties in broaching issues around race and ethnicity to other governors on their board. Research that examined the experiences of white school governors would complement the existing research and help determine similarities and differences in the factors that motivate them to govern and, in particular, how they understand and engage with issues concerning race and ethnicity.

6   Finally, this research has focused on Black school governors and while some of the experiences and recommendations may be similar, research that takes account of the views of other minority ethnic groups might also offer further ideas for the improved recruitment and retention of other sections of society into school governance.

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[12] One governor who wanted to take part in the research could not be included due to his being based outside of London. He was keen to stress that the views of Black governors in London would not necessarily reflect those outside of the capital.

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Appendix

Source: DfES (2004 – Governing the School of the Future)

Parent governors – (all state schools) Parents, including carers, of registered pupils at the school and parents of children for whom provision (educational or other) is made on the premises of the school, are eligible to stand for election for parent governorship at the school. Parent governors are elected by other parents at the school (or appointed by the governing body if insufficient people stand for election).

Staff governors – (all state schools) Both teaching and support staff paid to work at the school are eligible for staff governorship. Staff governors are elected by teaching and support staff paid to work at the school. The headteacher is a staff governor by virtue of his or her office (unless he or she chooses to resign as a governor).

Community governors (Community, Foundation and Voluntary Controlled schools) – Appointed by the governing body to represent community interests. Community governors can be persons who live or work in the community served by the school, or persons who do not work or live close to the school but are committed to good governance and the success of the school.

LEA governors (all state schools) – Appointed by the LEA. LEAs can appoint any eligible person as an LEA governor.

Foundation governors (Foundation and Voluntary schools) – Appointed by the school's founding body, church or other organisation named in the school's instrument of government or may hold the governorship ex-officio, as the holder of an office specified.

Partnership governors (Foundation schools without a foundation only) – Replace Foundation governors if the school does not have a foundation.

Sponsor governors (all state schools) – Discretionary category; individuals who give substantial assistance to the school, financially or in kind, can be appointed by the governing body as sponsor governors. If the governing body wants to appoint one or two sponsor governors it must seek nominations from the sponsor(s).

Associate members (all state schools) – Discretionary category; can be appointed by the governing body to attend committee meetings and are entitled to attend full governing body meetings. The definition of associate member is wide and pupils and persons representing providers of other services can be appointed as associate members.