

Nova Scotia School Boards Association

SCHOOL DISTRICT GOVERNANCE

Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

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Executive Summary

This literature study of school system governance had three mandates: (a) to identify the most significant theories, underlying assumptions, and/or conceptual frameworks that link to school board governance; (b) to identify the unique challenges facing school boards; and (c) to demonstrate potential ways in which the findings can be used to further clarify and support school board governance practices.

The report encompasses four theme areas: Foundations, Practices, Context, and Theories. In the foundations section, it was demonstrated that there is deep and wide-spread support for local participation in public education governance. While there have been aberrations, it is essentially an underlying assumption built on the principle of participatory democracy. However governing bodies are structured and whether individuals are elected to them or appointed, the voices in support of local participation are louder than the voices opposed. The rationale for this, beyond being considered a democratic freedom or right, commonly resides in the notion of schools as reflecting “community values.” Consequently, since they exist to educate the children of local families, community members should exercise some measure of direct control over the process.

There are two particular issues that arise from this. The first is in determining what constitutes “local values” and how they should or should not factor into the practices of school governance and the work of schools themselves. The second is in recognizing that bringing citizens together to debate the education of their children will occasionally result in disagreement and vigorous discussion and on rare occasions, dysfunction and implosion. This can happen in any collective decision making process, and requires an agreed-upon process for self-discipline and, in unusual situations, an agreed-upon process for external intervention.

In terms of board practices, any collection of people brought together to provide oversight and direction for an organization can, and likely will, encounter difficulties. These can take the form of within-group challenges that may arise from *a priori* or tacit knowledge and beliefs about how things should operate, to the ways in which board members are socialized into their roles, and the uncertainty in working out the particularities of these roles. In addition, there are questions about the sorts of leadership responsibilities boards should/could assume and what structures best allow these to be realized. Furthermore, there are questions in dealing with the internal necessity of harmony and determining a shared vision and action plan, and what role the board should play in connections with cognate or affiliated organizations. At its heart is the challenge of attempting to link board practices and processes with school district objectives and outcomes.

These issues are complicated not only by the unique circumstances of school boards, but also by the way political ideologies have altered the conditions and roles of public agencies generally. In the case of contemporary Western societies, the ideologies innate to neoliberalism have fundamentally inscribed new language into the role of public institutions. In the case of schooling, the advent of new curricula, use of standardized tests, and specification of outcomes has been part of the wave of neoliberalism, as has the ardent focus on student achievement or student success. In addition, neoliberal thinking has positioned public schools as being at the root of economic problems by not adequately preparing students for changing labour markets, thereby legitimating the increasing intervention of government in the work of schools and

school boards. Perhaps the most significant shift has been in the increasing importance of accountability and what it entails. Ironically, what it entails is not always clear, but that has not stopped it from becoming a flagship of educational discourse over the last few decades, which has likely contributed to its vagueness. Like role ambiguity for board members, lack of clarity creates a cloud of uncertainty around accountability. Even more than this, the manner in which the term is invoked is frequently negative. This is not a necessary condition of the word, but it is the manner in which it has evolved in the discourse on public schools.

One of the commonly identified challenges facing boards is role ambiguity. This plays out in internal dynamics as a result of a lack of role clarity at a broader level. If the board is an agent of government – which it is – is its primary role one of oversight and monitoring? If the board is a representative of its communities – which it is – is its role one of ensuring the presence of local values and stewardship in schools in ways that nurtures its children? It is not as dichotomous as this, but it is the case that these two polarities in thinking about governance can cause angst, uncertainty, and potentially conflict for and among school board members.

In terms of links to established theories, there is no global theory of governance and no agreed-upon theory of school system governance. Policy interdependence theory comes closest, mainly because it originates within the field of public education, but it is more a theory of the structure within which boards function, whereby different regulatory bodies jointly participate in the governance of public education. It does not theorize boards' internal workings, which would need to be a component of any school governance theory. Besides policy interdependence, three other theories were identified as linking to school system governance: agency theory, stewardship theory, and institutional theory. Agency theory was included because it describes the relational nature of having one body, a school board, act on behalf of another body, government. It also serves as the underlying basis for expectations of monitoring and accountability. Stewardship theory was included because it offers a counterpoint to agency theory. Its language carries with it notions of caring for and tending to, as well as enabling and empowering, language that seems particularly fitting for an enterprise that is about children and youth. Institutional theory was included because it brings with it the concepts for helping to make sense of how things work within organizational settings and in inter-organizational connections, and opens a window to an understanding of culture. This includes considerations of board cultures and the importance of values and beliefs, as well as organizational cultures and broader community cultures. Each of these theories provides underlying assumptions and premises that inform, and can potentially inform more powerfully, school district governance.

The review closes with a discussion of theorizing and theory development, and a proposed method to embark upon the development of governance theory in Nova Scotia. The approach recommended is bookmarked by the need for it to be problem driven with a goal of producing a testable theory that directly addresses difficulties in fields of governance practice, and by the need to seek strong explanations that account for the deep causes of the problems being studied. School board role ambiguity was selected as an appropriate focus, as it arose frequently in the literature as a challenging issue. There were two identified requirements for undertaking such a study. First, it must involve the participation and commitment of key stakeholders in education, most obviously the Nova Scotia School Boards Association and participating boards, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and the

Association of Nova Scotia Educational Administrators. The second is that there needs to be an agreed-upon approach to governance that serves as a test case. The recommendation was that a framework be developed from the theories reviewed, but with a particular emphasis on the core concepts of stewardship theory. This would require “deep readings” of stewardship theory, as well as the other theories in order to create a governance structure that could be implemented and studied in detail and over a long term. It would require extensive discussions and agreement on methods and procedures, and partner commitment to see the study through.

Regardless of whether or not role ambiguity serves as a focus, any study dedicated to the development of deep theory necessitates that it (a) be focused on an identified or foreshadowed problem, the solution to which would greatly enhance school system governance in Nova Scotia; (b) it must encompass extensive and diverse readings and study in order to develop deep understandings of the problem and ways of addressing it; (c) it must involve “an approach” to governance that has a clear conceptual orientation and strongly allied practices; and (d) and it must necessarily include, in various negotiated capacities, all key stakeholders in school district governance.

Lastly, the subtext throughout the manuscript is that deep theory is not esoteric or something to scoff at or run from, but rather something that, if well done, brings clarity and form to what otherwise may be simply a collection of learned (socialized) practices. There is nothing wrong with learned practices, especially if they are productive. But to frame something as productive means to do so against some standard or explicit framework. In the absence of this, what may seem good or feel good may not *really* be particularly helpful or productive from an institutional objectives perspective. Good practices that have a deeply informed theoretical framework are effectually different than good practices that don't.

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INTRODUCTION

Terminology

Throughout this document the term school district is used to refer to a school system as a whole. In Nova Scotia, these entities are referred to as school regions. In addition, there is a Province-wide Francophone board, Conseil scolaire acadien provincial. School trustees refers to a governing school board.

Setting the Stage

In a 1995 article on redesigning school board governance, Wong (1995, pp. 574-576) identified three essential issues that remain as central to understanding board governance in 2016 as they were twenty-one years ago:

- (1) On what basis do we determine one form of board governance is superior to another?
- (2) How does a board focus on producing learners?
- (3) School board accountability must be clarified.

Each of these is woven throughout this report, if framed slightly differently. There are many governance models available for boards. The first question asks whether there is any basis in research for selecting one over another.

The work of schools and districts is focused on the education of children. In the current educational environment in Canada, this is commonly framed in terms of student *achievement* or student *success*. Neither of these terms is trouble-free or as forthright as it might appear. This complicates the second question, which identifies the core issue facing all governing

boards, whether educational, corporate, nonprofit, or otherwise: how does the work of the board link to the purpose and outcomes of the organization, and what research evidence is there for suggesting that certain structures and functions are superior to others?

Lastly, the concept of *accountability*, which has always been an important board and organizational consideration and which is frankly central to any democratic form of government and governing (Farrell & Law, 1999, p. 294), has risen in prominence in neoliberal environments to mantra-levels. It is extolled as “an icon of good governance and has universal appeal” (Keay & Loughrey, 2015, pp. 253-254), yet it remains disturbingly vague: accountable to whom, for what, by what means, with what consequences?

To be clear, there has been much research undertaken in Canada and elsewhere to distinguish characteristics of high performing school districts (e.g., Fullan & Knight, 2011; Leithwood, 2010; Leithwood & McCullough, 2016). What is apparent in these studies is that boards are one of the important partners in helping to create positive change, one of what Lambert, Zimmerman, and Gardner (2016, p. 64) call collaborative leadership communities. However, the focus is frequently district-wide and not narrowly on the governing board itself. Questions therefore persist about how a board best organizes itself to establish and support district objectives, and how its actions connect ultimately to district outcomes. What would transpire in studies like these if the board were fully on side, but in a relatively passive role: ensuring adequate resources and support to empower those on the front lines, but not with its members engaged on committees associated with the change initiative or otherwise actively deployed? Would this make a difference to the results achieved? Would it make a difference to the board members themselves in terms of their sense of contribution to district initiatives,

regardless of any demonstrable connection to outcomes? Expressed differently, is it best for the board to have “arms around” or “fingers in” (Carver, 2010, p. 155)? Carver uses “fingers in” as a metaphor for micromanaging, but if we apply it more generically to refer to some level of direct and active involvement of board members with district initiatives, it serves as a useful endpoint on a board activity continuum. This will become clearer as we consider the community-based foundations of school boards, areas of challenge in everyday board practices, the influences of political ideology on public education, and, in the absence of an agreed-upon theory of school board work, some of the extant theories that provide useful concepts in understanding governance and that can pave the way towards the development of a deep theory of school district governance.

Mandate

This project was undertaken at the request of the Nova Scotia School Boards Association (NSSBA). The broad aim of the research was to identify and explore the theoretical and conceptual foundations of school board governance practices and processes. The specific mandate was:

- a) To identify the most significant theories, underlying assumptions, and/or conceptual frameworks that link to school board governance;
- b) To identify the unique challenges facing school boards; and
- c) To demonstrate potential ways in which these findings can be used to further clarify and support school board governance practices.

There are two cautions to state at the outset. First, there is a danger of viewing schools and school districts as components of an apparatus with moveable and correctible parts. Stickney (2015, p. 489) frames this circumstance well in an article addressing school effectiveness:

Speaking of 'system alignment,' administrators and theorists construe education in the form of an energy grid with schools and teachers as locatable nodes. In this hierarchical and mechanistic model, if strategically placed leaders throw the right switches, then the generalized 'correlates for success' (Lezotte, 2010; Lezotte & McNee, 2010) will be timely engaged and another 'lighthouse district' shines.

I address board structure and actions and their connections to student outcomes in a later section of this report, and cite literature that purportedly demonstrates these links. But it is prudent to view this judiciously. Aside from troubling the constructs of student *success* or student *achievement* – frequently manifest as scores on batteries of standardized or otherwise sanctioned tests – causal connections in the social sciences are more complex and nuanced than they might otherwise appear. It is always prudent in research to approach suggestions of causality with an attitude of, "That's interesting. Let's look at it more closely." It is here where the processes associated with the development of deep theory can shine a light.

The second caution is to recognize the unique situation of school boards, unlikely other governing boards, such as those serving corporations and nonprofit enterprises. This is captured well by Carver (2006, pp. 347-348):

They [school boards] face four peculiar conditions: (1) individual board members are often elected; (2) school boards are tightly regulated by state or provincial authorities;

(3) school boards preside in the public spotlight over an emotional topic; and (4) everybody thinks he or she is an expert because, after all, we all went to school.

Condition 1 is similar to the first situation confronting city councils. One of the effects is that school board members often act in a way that politically satisfies individual consumers rather than with the discipline needed for good governance. Condition 2 is so oppressive that school boards are forced to misuse most of their time in trivial pursuits. Condition 3 intensifies Condition 1 inasmuch as the emotional electorate can be unyielding and irrational. Condition 4 simply makes the job a little more difficult.

The extent to which these conditions apply varies among districts and jurisdictions, and even within boards. While the language may be overgeneralized, my reading of the literature suggests that it is not overstated.

Sources

The primary sources for this study constituted varied literatures, including those on school district governance, public board governance, nonprofit board governance, and corporate governance, as well as a sample of presentations and workshops dealing specifically with school district governance. The rationale for undertaking a broad sweep of literatures, rather than a restricted focus on school district governance, is two-fold. The first is that the field of education is transdisciplinary in nature, drawing from instructional content areas within the physical sciences, social sciences, humanities, and arts, but also from disciplines that inform instruction, learning, and administration, notable psychology, sociology, and organizational and management studies. While this might otherwise be viewed as a tired and overused rationale,

my sense is that it retains merit in the field of educational governance due to its undertheorized nature. To ignore cognate fields is to be unnecessarily closed to the potential contributions of scholarly work from outside the borders of the discipline. In short, the principle that informed this work is that it is better to look afield and find nothing relevant, than to not look at all.

The second reason builds on the first: literature on school district governance, *at its underlying theoretical and conceptual levels*, is limited. There is assuredly a rich and growing research base on school board practices and processes, topics such as the importance of vision, role clarification, intra- and inter-organizational relationship building, and professional development, among others. Much of this has been enunciated clearly, though not necessarily “solved,” through commissioned reports (e.g., Sheppard, Galway, Brown, & Wiens, 2013), as well as in the general academic literature (e.g., Seel & Gibbons, 2012), and some of it will be visited later in this report. Yet, answers provided at one level often beget questions at another. For example, there is widespread agreement in the literature that board role clarification is important and necessary for effective functioning. This makes sense. But it doesn’t address *what* role the board should play. Or *who decides* the contours of a particular board’s role? Or whether an *active* board is better, in some assessable way, than a *passive* board? Or what it even means to be *passive* and *active*?

There are also well developed models of board governance. In my reading, the most extensively developed and broadly subscribed are the Policy Governance model of John Carver (e.g., Carver, 2006) and the Coherent Governance model of Linda Dawson and Randy Quinn (e.g., Quinn & Dawson, 2011), neither of which arose from within the confines of public education, but both of which can be, and have been, applied and adapted to this field.

However, in my view, these – and others of their like – are governance *models*, not theories or conceptual frameworks (although a case could be made for the latter). The mandate for this work was to look “beneath” the models and practices, in an attempt to identify the deeper assumptions, theories, concepts, research, and/or frameworks on which they stand or from which they derive, overtly or tacitly. This proved to be more ambiguous than it initially appeared.

A Note about Theories, Concepts, and Frameworks

At its most basic level, any framework within the social sciences attempts to identify core or foundational concepts that bear on the phenomenon in question and demonstrate their interconnectedness (Scaffa, 1998). The terms “theoretical framework” and “conceptual framework” are commonly conflated and occasionally, like the term “theory” itself, used in multiple ways (Tight, 2015) and frequently misunderstood. Theory refers to a carefully constructed explanation of some phenomenon and the relationships that bound it, which is then “testable, verifiable or falsifiable” (Kettley, 2010, p. 9). It is this latter piece and the work associated with it that distinguishes scholarly theory from its everyday usage, which often passes as a synonym for “ideal” or “not practical.” Good theory is anything but. It is rigorously investigated and subject to rejection or revision as a result of these investigations. And while the language of “testable, verifiable, and falsifiable” is empirical and may evoke resistance in some quarters, it is in principle, by whatever name, what happens in any discipline in the development of deep theory. Yet, as Kettley (p. 9) notes, “theory is always an artifice or contrivance.” Theories are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed, making them, in

effect, works in progress rather than established facts. This should not be equated with flimsy or insubstantial. Theory of the sort Kettley describes arises from extensive and rigorous theorizing and research, and provides a solid foundation on which to design effective and efficient practices, which are then modified and adapted as more is learned through ongoing practice and further theorizing based on new research. Still, as Carver (2010, p. 150) notes in an article arguing for the development of a global governance theory, “theory-blindness persists despite historical evidence that when any field final develops, tests, and hones theory is when it graduates from single steps of improvement to transformation.” I will have more to say about the importance of theory building in school district governance at the conclusion of this review.

As already noted, theoretical and conceptual *frameworks* are frequently used interchangeably. Most commonly, they are employed to frame a research study at its outset. Based on an extensive literature search, frameworks identify the concepts and established theories that bear on the phenomenon being investigated, i.e., they “connect the elements of the problems” (Suter, 2012, p. 89). Where they perhaps differ is in what can be termed their predictive power. Theoretical frameworks that derive from extensively tested theories demonstrate, to lesser or greater extents, the ability to speculate on likely outcomes of expected actions, of the sort (simplistically stated): if “a” then “b”. Conceptual frameworks, on the other hand, identify the central ideas and relationships among them (Merkyl-Davies & Brennan, 2011, p. 418), but perhaps without the same degree of predictability. But this may be splitting hairs. I am more inclined to talk of the theoretical *foundations* and conceptual *foundations* underlying governance practices, and employ the term *framework* only where others have done so. And perhaps that is also splitting hairs.

Process and Organization

I followed a structured but recursive process in undertaking the literature review, which included: (a) searches of electronic data bases and library holdings; (b) extensive note-taking of selected articles and documents, (c) the establishment of issue categories, and (d) the subsequent development of themes. The notes I took focused on what I considered to be central or otherwise important points within each text, article, and document. Once I had read sufficiently to garner an emerging understanding of the literature, I began an analysis of my notes and established issue categories based on what I had written. For example, and not surprisingly, one particularly rich issue category was “accountability.” Categories like this helped me not only visualize different facets of the field of governance, but also highlighted areas which begged further reading. I eventually established twenty-two issue categories, and in a process of exploring relationships among them, constructed four theme areas – **Foundations, Practices, Contexts, and Theories** – and added two closing sections – **Bringing Together** and **Looking Ahead: Theorizing and Theory Development**. These six serve as the organizing framework for what follows. In broad terms, through this structure I begin with underlying premises about school boards, followed by a selective overview of current practices and issues, to a contextualization piece that situates these practices within a wider socio-political context, to an attempt to link (if not explain) practices to established theories that connect to governance, and finally to position all of this in terms of potential implications and the benefits to be gained by theorizing and theory development in school board governance.

To delimit or circumscribe the review, I largely restricted it to factors that bear directly on governance, and therefore did not begin at the deeper levels of philosophical, social, and

psychological theorizing on human agency and social structuring. This is a limitation brought on largely by time and mandate. It is a double-edged sword. It is good to have timelines and be asked to produce something by an established date, which, incidentally, I violated by an order of weeks, with NSSBA forbearance. But academic inquiry is not satisfied with initial or surface-level answers. It moves beyond the overt to discern the covert, to find the deeper answers – if they exist – that may be invisible in everyday practices. This takes considerable time, much of it spent reading and contemplating, long before anything appears on a page. This was the tension.

The last point is to note that this work differs in two important ways from recent research done in Canada on school governance. For example, the pan-Canadian study *School Boards Matter* (Sheppard et al., 2013) includes data from questionnaires and interviews. This report does not, as that was not the mandate. Also, Sheppard et al. largely confine themselves to the educational literature broadly, whereas I have elected, wisely or unwisely, to step outside the discipline to see if there are things to be learned elsewhere. I am mindful of Brandon's (2016) dictum that school board governance is not corporate governance. Indeed it is not. But it doesn't mean that there are no connections or potentially informative principles and concepts that can be mined elsewhere.

FOUNDATIONS

Why Have School Boards?

The most fundamental question related to school boards, even before considering who is on them, how they get there, and what roles they play, is why they exist at all. Why not

design schools that offer curricula which others (e.g., community groups, municipal officials, centralized government ministries, professional educators or educationists) develop and resource, hire duly trained professional teachers and support staff, and turn them loose to teach children? The answer to this question is as relevant today as it was when North American public schools began two centuries ago: local participation and control (Kirst, 2008). Long before there were formal theories like agency theory, stewardship theory, institutional theory, and policy interdependence theory, there were bodies – boards, trustees, citizen groups – that were “acting on behalf of” to establish what was important for communities in the education of their children and to ensure that it was carried out. In this sense, school boards in whatever configuration have always acted as agents on behalf of some group, as amorphous as the general public or as structured as ministries of education. A complexity of school board governance, however, rests in the fact that “acting on behalf of” is no longer an either/or issue, if it ever was. Nor is it necessarily unequivocal how participation and control are to be played out, since both concepts can be spun positively or negatively and expanded to include a plethora of roles, many of which may lack the clarity and directedness that would otherwise increase their efficacy. The only thing that is clear is that boards are agents.

The Centrality and Complexity of Local Participation

It is not difficult to locate legions of support for the historical and ongoing importance of local participation in schooling (Alsbury, 2004; Björk, 2008; Corbett, 2008; Galway, Sheppard, Wiens, & Brown; 2013; Kirst, 2008; Land, 2002; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Lewis & Naidoo, 2004; Manzer, 1994). While issues of centralization versus de-centralization have become ubiquitous

in governance discourse in recent decades (Galway et al., 2013; Manzer, 1994), and while local boards have experienced a reduction in breadth of discretionary action (Kirst, 2008) and decreasing authority (Sheppard et al., 2013), local citizen participation – participatory democracy – enjoys stronger support than calls for its elimination (Resnick & Bryant, 2010). In this discourse perhaps the oddest lament comes from Boyd (2008), who suggests that the need for democracy, as manifest through local participation, is receiving less attention due to “our obsession with the threats of globalization, international competition, accountability, and high-stakes testing” (p. xvi). I will address this later in the report, but it is worth noting here that the idea of an increasingly interrelated and competitive world somehow causing the loss of local connectedness is disquieting and perhaps reason enough to consider revisiting the principles of local participation and board autonomy through public fora and engaged dialogue.

The crucial importance of local participation is stated clearly by Alsbury (2004, p. 360):

School governance theorists espousing non-democratic governance positions continue to ignore that the great *equalizer* or legitimate equity in a democracy is borne by the *liberty* provided to the citizenry to affect change in their school board representation, rather than in an analysis of their willingness or success in exercising that liberty.

In other words, the frequently low levels of citizen engagement in school board elections (Land, 2002), the occasions where internal difficulties render boards ineffective and even internally caustic (Corbett, 2008), the reports of increasing frequency of government intervention in board policy making (MacLellan, 2009), are no argument for their elimination. Democracy is served by citizens having the *freedom* to be meaningfully engaged in the operation of local schools, regardless of whether or not they take it up. Referring specifically to nonprofit boards,

but with easy translation to education, Rawlings (2012) argues that volunteer participation is a “key component in fostering civil society and democratic governance” (p. 321). But other than serving the principles of democracy, which itself is an evolving and complicated ideal (Dufek & Holzer, 2013; Gerlsbeck, 2016; Smit & Oosthuisen, 2011), what is it that local participation in school governance is reported to achieve? What are the “broad effects on education” (Lewis and Naidoo, 2004, p. 102) that local autonomy supposedly brings?

A benchmark in this discourse is to appreciate the centrality of schools to local communities (Ford & Ihrke, 2016; Galway et al., 2013). As Frankel (2008, p. 155) notes, “Research on school boards over the years has demonstrated again and again the close connection between communities and their schools.” Outcries concerning school closures demonstrate this well (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005). There is an interesting dialectic here, for while many voices suggest that school board autonomy has eroded in recent times (Boyd, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009), the perception of board members in a large pan-Canadian study (Sheppard et al., 2013, p. 41) is that governments nonetheless view the work of local citizens as important:

While there appears to be some degree of tension between most boards and their respective provincial governments, the majority of our study participants appear to believe that governments are generally sensitive to the importance of school boards in representing local interests in public education.

What is not voiced here is how much power is afforded boards in “representing local interests” to affect changes in policy and curriculum. This will emerge in a subsequent discussion of board roles, but it is important to asterisk that this is one of many facets of governance that, if left

unclarified, reduces a board's ability to function as a cohesive whole – to have what Saatcioglu and Sargut (2014) identify as good “closure” – and in worse case scenarios can lead to significant dysfunction (Corbett, 2008).

The idea of schools as an extension of communities leads inexorably to the importance of community engagement in matters of education. This idea of “extension of”, and its associated notion of “reflection of,” derives from a “deep-rooted belief that educational governance should reflect community and regional values and priorities” (Galway et al., 2013, p. 6). While not referring specifically to the board itself, Leithwood and Louis (2012, p. 97) state that “...leadership at the district level is critical for creating and sustaining a district culture that fosters parent and community engagement.” The former identifies engagement as a good in itself, but Leithwood and Louis take a further step in suggesting that engagement in community is one of the many partnering activities that figures into the jigsaw of student achievement. This is a considerable step, from basic principles of “engaging in” and “reflecting,” to more substantive claims of “impacting ends,” and needs to be queried further. Brandon (2016) also argues the impact case strongly, and it makes considerable sense. Yet at an underlying level, there is still a lack of clarity (perhaps only in my mind) concerning the fidelity of the connection between “board structure and action” on the one hand, and “student or district outcomes” on the other.

In what may seem like a digression, at a very basic level schools are an extension of what Dennet (2006, p. 128), in a philosophical treatise on religion and a discussion of genetic and cultural modes of knowledge transmission and replication, calls the *parent-child instructional pathway*. It is a mechanism for passing on cultural information from one

generation to another, and concern about the fidelity of this transmission beyond the family environment is visible in school-based language around the reflection of “community values,” a construct that presumably increases in complexity with community size and cultural diversity, and itself needs deeper exploration. Whose values? How are they manifest in school curricula and practices? What happens when deeply ingrained cultural practices, like Christmas concerts (to name a locally salient issue), are altered in the name of cultural diversity and respect, and how do we best navigate the inevitable public outrage?

Obviously, in the last two centuries schools have undergone multiple reconfigurations and re-inventions to reflect broader social and economic changes and new imperatives, with purposes extending far beyond mirroring local values. Yet the local retains a strong foothold in the discourse around the importance of school boards and the ideal of incorporating community values and ensuring local involvement (Alsbury, 2004; Björk, 2008; Corbett, 2008; Ford & Ihrke, 2016; Galway et al., 2013; Halpin, 1999; Land, 2002; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Lewis & Naidoo, 2004; MacLellan, 2009; Manzer, 1994; Sattler, 2012; Seel & Gibbons, 2012; Smit & Oosthuizen, 2011; Vibert, Portelli, Shields, & LaRocque; 2002; Wirt & Kirst, 1992; Wong, 1995). These ideals are not only reflected in the academic literature, but invariably appear in workshops, modules, and self-assessment guides constructed by Canadian school board associations (e.g., British Columbia School Trustees Association, n.d.; Nova Scotia School Boards Association, 2016; Saskatchewan School Boards Association; n.d.) and task force reports (e.g., Alberta School Boards Association, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education; 2009; Sheppard et al., 2013).

It is clear that there is extensive support for local participation in school governance. The intricacies and complications of how that unfolds in practice will appear in the following section of this report. Noteworthy here is that this involvement invariably carries unavoidable complexities. As Corbett (2008, p. 36) notes: “Giving ordinary citizens a say in how schools work is problematic because different citizens have different loyalties, interest, perceptions – all of which makes decision-making problematic.” This statement is contained in an article on the 2006 disbanding of the Halifax Regional School Board, the largest school system in Nova Scotia (paradoxically, with one of the smallest governing boards). This action by the Minister of Education was ostensibly a result of reported internal board difficulties and challenges. The details of this, while clearly central to the citizen-involvement debate, are less important here than recognizing that assembling any group of people to undertake a task brings with it the necessity of planning for the possible eventualities that Corbett identifies. This is well recognized and described in popular governance models (e.g., Carver, 2006; Dawson & Quinn, 2011), yet its complexity in educational governance stems from more than simply bringing together people with diverse backgrounds and interests.

Unlike corporate boards, school boards face challenges associated with at least two distinctive situations: (a) the aforementioned importance of reflecting the local – whatever that means – while achieving something much broader and transferable, and (b) the reality of having more than one stakeholder, or to use corporate language, one owner. The former is well cast by Wirt and Kirst (1992) in a discussion of the history of public school education in the United States, “...local control of the School has been a dominant value in our history, but so has the concept of equal educational opportunity” (p. 47). How do we balance equality of

educational opportunity for students with the apparent importance of reflecting and addressing local and regional realities? Who is responsible for what? Even more basically, what does equality of educational opportunity mean? As will become clear, these two “imperatives” are not equally weighted, nor are their contemporary usages necessarily congruent with their original meanings.

PRACTICES

Framing

There is a substantial literature on effective board functions and circumstances of dysfunction, some on school boards specifically, others on public boards generally, and still others on private and corporate boards. This is cluttered terrain, and I hesitate to go there with the idea of only touching upon selected high points. It deserves a more extensive analysis than I provide. That said, my rationale for wading into these deep waters is that (a) the second mandate – identifying unique challenges facing boards – necessitates at least a basic understanding of the issues facing boards, and (b) linking to theories and underlying assumptions – the core mandate – means linking to *something*.

My approach is to begin with a very brief overview of the *premises* (not the training models themselves) with three governance models: Policy Governance, Coherent Governance, and Global Governance. This is intended only as an identification of the areas or regions of governance addressed within them. The rationale for this is an assumption that these models are popular because they do at least two things: (1) they provide a structure that brings focus and purpose to the work of board members, and (2) they name areas that while important to

board functioning, can also be arenas of discord and dysfunction and therefore require careful attention.

The remaining subsections focus in four areas: a short commentary on *a priori* knowledge, role ambiguity, leadership, and the inner and outer workings of boards. Each has been chosen for a reason: its peculiar silence (*a priori* knowledge); its frequent appearance in the literature as an area of substantial concern and importance to board members (role ambiguity); the growing literature that school boards provide direction and strategic support for district initiatives, and do not simply function in a monitoring/agency fashion (leadership); and an example of a framework that offers a way to conceptualize the work of a board (inner and outer workings).

It is, then, a small but intentional sample of school board practices, and not a comprehensive review (which was beyond the mandate). Nevertheless, it provides a basis on which to contextualize the offerings of the theories described in a later section of the manuscript, and serves as a foundation on which to sketch an approach to governance theorizing and first steps in the development of a school board governance theory.

Models

Policy Governance. Carver's Policy Governance model has been in existence for approximately forty years (Carver, 2006, p. vii), and while he most commonly refers to it as a model in this text, he also describes it as both a theory and a model elsewhere (Carver, 2010, p. 155). I stated earlier that I believe his is a governance *model*. But is important to recognize that models are frequently bases on which to build and test theories, so a model is not necessarily

an endpoint. In this particular text he identifies fifteen action areas (my language) that he believes a good governance model should address (pp. 30-32):

- *“Cradle” vision.* By this he names the crucial role that vision and visioning plays in the work of a board.
- *Explicitly address fundamental values.* This speaks to the importance of the board as a type of steward of the organization’s values.
- *Force an external focus.* Interestingly, here Carver refers to the board as having more of an external gaze, and less on what he calls “organizational mechanics” (p. 30).
- *Enable an outcome-driven organizational system.* This argues for the alignment of board structuring and decision-making procedures with the identified outcomes or objectives of the organization.
- *Separate large issues from small ones.* This is a time-apportioning dictum to metaphorically not lose site of the forest for the trees.
- *Force forward thinking.* This is a maxim for strategic leadership, that is, leadership that is future oriented and results focused.
- *Enable proactivity.* As the term indicates, this identifies the importance of a board being preemptive as opposed to reactive.
- *Facilitate diversity and unity.* This suggests uniformity of board position, while also recognizing the value of varying opinions and diverse board makeup.

- *Describe relationships or relevant constituencies.* This position – especially challenging in educational governance – indicates that the board must understand its various publics and how they connect to the board’s work.
- *Define a common basis for discipline.* Given the dynamics of group work and collective decision-making, this suggests that boards need to self-monitor and establish procedures for self-discipline.
- *Delineate the board’s role in common topics.* This argues for the board to carefully define the role it will play in relation to other role-players.
- *Determine what information is needed.* It is important for the board to know what information and data it needs in order to govern effectively.
- *Balance overcontrol and undercontrol.* This is a maxim for knowing the difference between being a “rubber-stamper and a meddler” (p. 32).
- *Use board time efficiently.* This is an area commonly identified in the literature as problematic. In order to operate effectively, a board needs to know how to most prudently employ its time and deploy its members.
- *Enable simultaneously muscular and sensitive use of board power.* In this last precept, Carver is suggesting that boards need to act judiciously, both with élan but also with thoughtfulness.

Even without careful scrutiny, it is obvious that the majority of these action areas deal with internal board functions, which, not surprisingly, is the most likely locus of problems.

Coherent Governance. The Coherent Governance model of Dawson and Quinn, both of whom were trained by Carver (Quinn & Dawson, 2011, p. xi), not surprisingly shows overlap

with his in focus areas. In a text that outlines the structure of the model (Dawson & Quinn, 2011), the authors state that Coherent Governance “is built around four different but interrelated types of policies, each serving a very distinct purpose” (p. 4), which they describe as (pp. 4-5):

- *Ends*. These refer rather obviously to the outcomes the organization is expected to achieve.
- *Operational Expectations*. This refers to the internal functioning of the board, how it separates its work from the daily management of the organization or district, what it should and shouldn't do, and how it monitors the organization's compliance with established policies.
- *Board-CEO Relations*. This principle focuses on the authority provided the CEO (superintendent) and the basis on which he or she will be evaluated.
- *Governance Culture*. In short, this argues for the board to develop an internal culture that allows it to most effectively and efficiently do its work.

The first two incorporate many if not all of the principles on Carver's list, as they deal with internal and external board operations and functions. The third – Board-CEO relations – while not explicitly named on Carver's list, I assume to be a central component of the *describe relationships or relevant constituencies* action area, and furthermore receives dedicated attention within his text. The latter – governance culture – is novel, by name, to Coherent Governance. The importance of identifying culture should not be overlooked, for it directs attention to not just the overt ways in which culture is manifest through objects and actions, but also to the everyday invisibility of subsurface intersubjective meanings and understandings

that can lie at the root of conflict and dysfunction, yet in other circumstances form the basis for exceptional accomplishment and seamless collective functioning. One of the theories identified later, institutional theory, positions culture as a central organizational focus. While Dawson and Quinn key specifically on the culture of the board itself, culture more broadly – central office cultures, school cultures, district cultures, community cultures – substantially influences how schooling plays out for students, and thus can be signaled as a vital area for board understanding, at the very least.

Global Governance. There are other governance models, some utilizing different concepts and placing emphases in different places and drawing on different terminology. Seel (2008), in his Global Governance Model, identifies three categories of board operation: *fiduciary* (accountability), *strategic* (responsibility), and *generative* (obligation). The content within the first two categories is present in both Policy Governance and Coherent Governance. However, the language of *generative* appears to me to be novel. He describes this level as one where “board members give full expression to the community interests and reflect on how the nonprofit can fulfill a meaningful and relevant role in the community” (no page numbers). While all three levels – fiduciary, strategic, generative – have an inward organizational focus, the latter two also include an external community focus, and significantly so at the generative level. There is nothing novel in this *per se*, since all governing boards in any organization work within circumstances where a knowledge of, and connection to, external environments is important if not crucial. In this way there is certainly overlap on many dimensions with both Policy Governance and Coherent Governance. But in the generative component Seel pedestals

the significance of community to board operations. In this sense, Global Governance connects readily to a foundational tenet of school board operations.

All three models – Policy Governance, Coherent Governance, Global Governance – have been developed out of work the authors have done in nonprofit, public (including school), and corporate settings. Different components could be stressed in different board circumstances and different organization types. But as Carver (2010, p. 150) notes, no one size fits all. What they accomplish at a basic level, for my purposes here, is to identify core areas of operation for governing boards, areas of attention and action that are important, and ways of thinking about the purpose of the work they do and the contributions they make.

***A priori* knowledge**

In a booklet prepared for Volunteer Canada and Canadian Heritage, as part of a larger research project, Seel and Iffrig (2006, p. 4) state what may be a normative circumstance in the work of governing boards: “Beliefs about governance are reproduced through successive generations of board members. This makes changing beliefs difficult.” This foreshadows two questions. What do board members already know about governance before they become engaged in board work and how do these implicit understandings influence their approach to governance? What strategies are employed by boards in new member induction activities to expose and understand their *a priori* knowledge of governance *and* of the organization whose board they are joining? We know from a large-scale research study conducted over forty years ago by Lortie (1975, p. 61) that those who enter the teaching profession do so having had what he termed an “apprenticeship of observation.” That is, because they had been elementary and

secondary students for at least thirteen years, they had developed uncritical understandings of the profession that tacitly framed how they understood and approached teaching. The same can be said of those joining school boards. They have doubtless had similar socializing experiences. Surely these have impacts in varied ways. In an article on board restructuring, Danzberger (1994, p. 370) states that “school boards frequently appear dysfunctional because of conflicts between members and the resulting incapacity to chart a clear direction for their school system.” In cases like these, how much of this might be attributable to the *a priori* understandings board members bring to their work? What might be incorporated into induction activities that could forestall this?

I mark *a priori* knowledge because, with a couple of exceptions, I have found little research that speaks specifically to it, although the impact of board members’ prior experiences is certainly acknowledged by Seel and Gibbons (2012, pp. 30-31). While not directly focused on how *a priori* knowledge of governance and education can influence board dynamics, a research study by Newton and Sackney (2005, pp. 448-449) in Saskatchewan, using survey data and conversational analyses, identified tacit knowledge as playing a substantial role in board decision making. And in research by Lowham and Lowham (2015) in the United States, the investigators designed a study that revealed educators’ (including board members) *a priori* knowledge of democracy (p. 1). But with these exceptions, the shortage of research explicitly on board members’ prior knowledge and its influence on board functioning is puzzling, especially given the wealth of research on both students’ (e.g., Fyfe & Rittle-Johnson, 2016) and teachers’ prior knowledge (e.g., Ell, Hill, & Grudnoff, 2012).

Role Ambiguity

A highly significant issue facing school boards is one of determining what roles they might most effectively play and how to establish balance or equilibrium in how those roles play out. This has both an external and internal dimension. One facet of the external dimension is determining the relationship between board members and those who put them there, or to whom they may feel a sense of allegiance and obligation. This is perhaps more complicated in the case of school district governance than in other forms of governance and it arises frequently in the literature.

Carver (2010, p. 153) differentiates *performance* and *ethical* obligations for governing boards. The former can be understood as a responsibility to the body to which a board is primarily accountable for fulfilling its terms of duty. Since school boards exist in Nova Scotia under the provisions of the Education Act, it can be understood that they have a *performative* obligation to the Province through the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. [This will be explored further in a subsequent discussion of accountability.] But given that board members are primarily elected in Nova Scotia and serve a local region in which they are residents, they can feel a very strong *ethical* obligation to the stakeholders of their particular board, which includes not only those who elected them but also the professional and support staffs of the schools and central office they oversee. Areas of tension between performative and ethical obligations can create substantial role ambiguity. This can play out as minor issues of disquiet that require internal board discussion or counsel from the board chair, but on volatile issues it can erupt publicly and result in substantial turmoil and reputational damage.

In a module on governance prepared by the British Columbia School Trustees Association (p. 4, n.d.), trustees are advised of the importance of seeking balance between representing those who elected them with their role as a board member. And in an analysis of school closure actions in Ontario, Fredua-Kwarten (2005, p. 4) alludes to the “traditions of representative democracy” whereby community members can influence board direction by acting through their local representatives. As noted above, this potentially places board members in conflict situations on some issues.

In a research study of postsecondary governing boards, Kezar (2006) conducted elite interviews with 132 participants who had extensive experience on public postsecondary boards. She noted that “the finding about the importance of breaking down the political orientations of board members and establishing professionalism and civility among board members was a distinctive finding for public boards” (p. 998), also observing that board chairs need to attend carefully to handling these situations. This point is strongly reinforced in a critical analysis by Saatcioglu, Moore, Sargut, and Bajaj (2011, p. 6) of the role played by social capital (more about this later) in school board governance:

School board research has consistently indicated that board members too often function as ‘representatives’ of contending constituencies or special interests, or champions of a single or narrow set of personally compelling issues, rather than ‘trustees’ charged with developing common goals and policies that reflect shared values and interests of the district as a whole.

They argue that by establishing trusting relationships, the board can “counteract the fear of opportunism and self-interest and be beneficial both for the board as a whole and for the

members individually” (p. 7). This idea of self-interest and its potential impact will arise again when we consider agency theory.

In a series of research interviews conducted with 43 school board chairs in Alberta, as part of a study by Seel and Gibbons (2012), role clarity was identified by all participants as one dimension of important focus. Eight subcategories of concern within role clarity were identified: (1) role ambiguity, (2) governance versus management roles, (3) clarity of the role of the chair, (4) ambiguities about the roles of the public, (5) representation, (6) erosion of board powers, (7) autonomy of school boards, and (8) relevance of school boards (pp. 33-35). The likely generalizability of these issues around role is demonstrated by the fact that each is present in the literature on school board operation, and some are transferable to boards of any type.

In Seel’s and Gibbons’ study, participants were clear about some aspects of their roles, especially those that might commonly fall under the traditional accountability or fiduciary umbrella, like budgets, communications, and oversight (p. 33). That these oversight functions of boards were unambiguous to these participants is not surprising. Oversight, as one form of accountability, is a central pillar of agency language (Bainbridge, 2008; Brown, 2005; Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997b; Eisenhardt, 1989; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015; Miller, 2002; Shapiro, 2005), which will be explored more fully both when we look at political contexts, as well as in a subsequent section on the extant theories that connect to governance.

The ambiguous part of role clarification mentioned by Seel’s and Gibbons’ participants was “board as manager or board as leader” (P. 33). Like the taken-for-granted nature of agency-type functions, their uncertainty here is again unsurprising, as it calls into question how a board

actively participates in the work of the district, i.e., whether, again invoking Carver's (2010, p. 155) language, it acts with arms around or fingers in. Fullan (2016, p. 171) stresses the importance of boards knowing the difference between governance and management. Yet neither of these concepts is unidimensional. Boundaries commonly blur or overlap and both governance and management can be constructed in multiple ways.

In a research-based overview of school board history and evolution in Canada, MacLellan (2009) draws on a leadership framework established by Fullan (2001, as cited in MacLellan, p. 135) and one developed by the Canadian School Boards Association (p. 137) to argue for 10 areas in which school boards can provide leadership connected to student achievement, which in his language "is key for effective leadership outcomes for school boards" (p. 134). I summarize his main points below (pp. 135-140):

- *Vision.* MacLellan's language in this domain speaks to both a "vision and strategic plan" (which itself implies active and forward-looking engagement), and of articulating and reinforcing "core values" that align to "organizational goals."
- *Communication skills.* The heart of this is the ability of "effectively addressing a range of audiences" and of the need to "establish a common language" [with the Board of Education] to assist in governance.
- *Instructional leadership.* This argues for boards "recognizing and funding a variety of supervisory models to improve active teaching and learning that *reflects community needs*" (my emphasis). MacLellan calls on boards to support "research-based classroom practices."

- *Decision making.* MacLellan opens by stating that “Critical thinking and problem solving are essential so school boards can frame and prioritize issues effectively.”
- *Organizational management.* This speaks to the importance of boards drawing on data “to interpret issues and trends” that will assist them in their work, and the appropriate allocation of resources to enable the establishment of good learning environments. He also speaks to the diverse backgrounds of board members and how this “may cause friction,” but calls for “open dialogue” between board members and senior professional staff, so that they are not “overstepping into areas that extend beyond their oversight.”
- *Managing change.* MacLellan argues that to effectively manage change, boards need to understand the change process. He speaks to the importance of “nurturing relationships within the organization” to “create clearer understandings when dealing with complex situations,” and that 21st century boards are “often ill-equipped financially and administratively to dig deep into the question of how to manage change.”
- *Culture.* Like Dawson and Quinn (2011), MacLellan recognizes the importance of the board’s own culture, and the need for “creating and promoting an organizational culture that is a healthy, sustainable learning community.”
- *Ethics.* The central message here is the necessity of “integrity and fairness” through such tenets as “respecting the rights of others” and “ethical leadership.”
- *Technological literacy.* Not surprisingly, this dictum argues for the wise use of technology to assist in effective board functioning.

All of these are undoubtedly sound principles, but as I indicated earlier, answers at one level often beget questions at another. MacLellan's purpose in this chapter in an edited book on educational leadership in Canada was likely to sketch the lay of the land, as it were, and to point to areas for future investigation and fruitful action. He has done this well. But here are just some of the more obvious questions that can be asked of the items on his list. Whose vision? Whose core values? How are these established? What is involved in establishing a common language with the Board of Education (or Ministry)? Whose language can or should take priority in areas of potential disagreement? What research is used in determining good classroom practices? What counts as data in these cases? What does it mean to improve active teaching and learning that reflects community needs? How are community needs determined? If critical thinking and problem solving are important to effective board operation, what strategies are in place to help board members develop these skills? And what exactly *is* critical thinking? What does open dialogue look like in times of board member conflict? What strategies are in place to moderate and deal with conflict? Who determines the boundaries that boards should not overstep? If MacLellan is right that 21st century boards are ill-equipped with the resources – let alone the necessary understandings – to manage change, how exactly are they expected to do it? What constitutes (board) culture and how is it purposely developed, as opposed to just happening? What does a healthy, sustainable learning community look like? Does it have any place for discord? What does fairness mean? Who determines its boundaries? What is ethical leadership? How does it differ from everyday educational leadership, however that is understood? How can technology best be used to facilitate effective board work? Are there times when it should not be used? And perhaps most importantly, how does any of this

connect to student achievement or student success in ways that, if not measurable, are clearly discernible and traceable?

I raise these questions not by way of suggesting that there are deficits in MacLellan's article; in fact, quite the opposite. His is a highly informative and helpful account of the history and circumstances of school boards in Canada. Addressing the questions I ask would have taken many articles if not a book on his part. There are answers to these questions, or at least strategies for working through them, and some are more involved than others. But for board members to engage with all of these expectations could be overwhelming, making substantial demands on them in terms of time, learning, understanding, implementing, monitoring, modifying, and so on. They are likely all important, but it would be useful to know if some hold greater purchase than others.

This idea of connecting board structures and actions with district objectives and outcomes is arguably more complex than talk of incorporating local values, dealing with internal board processes and machinations, and modes of leadership. Even within what might appear to be a less complicated board environment, Elsayed (2010, p. 85) points out that on corporate boards there is "inconclusive evidence between board leadership structure and corporate performance." It is very clear from the research on educational change that marshalling district resources in a strategic direction can lead to impressive results (e.g., Bedard, 2009; Fullan 2009, 2011; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Leithwood 2010; Leithwood & McCullough, 2016). But none of these isolate the work of the board itself and attempt to directly link *its structures and actions* to outcomes. The closest comes through the work of Brandon and Hanna (2013) in Alberta, where they attempt to demonstrate the impact that

school councils have on student achievement. However, the reported links are frequently *perceived* connections through the eyes of stakeholders and trustees themselves. Trying to connect board work directly with outcomes might be seen as reductionist and inappropriate, as no one component of a school district operation is likely by itself to lead to measurable changes in student performance. But it would still be helpful to know which actions deserve the greatest emphasis, for focusing here could reduce the demands on the board and allow it concentrate in areas of greatest impact. A report by Leithwood and McCullough (2016) in the next section on board leadership demonstrates a statistical link.

In a fine example of scholarly theorizing on sport governance, Ferkins and Shilbury (2015, pp. 496-497) point out that an imbalance of board functions can lead to tensions and that ignoring this can prevent a board from achieving “optimum strategic capability.” And as Glass (2008, p. 300) ominously notes, boards can “shape and create climates that may not be conducive to organizational leadership and system effectiveness.” What distinguishes these boards from their counterparts, if there is nothing in their internal dynamics that suggests problems?

Board Leadership

Returning to Seel’s and Gibbons’ (2012) study, an area of concern raised by their participants was that of the erosion of board authority. That has been identified in numerous research studies of board operation in Canada and abroad (Cistone, 2008; Kirst, 2008; MacLellan, 2009; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009; Sheppard et al., 2013). As we will see in the next section on political context, there has been at least the perception that educational

decision making has become more centralized and that the scope of board authority has consequently diminished. In Sheppard et al. (2013), the reduction in school board authority focused on changes around collective bargaining, labour negotiations, targeted funding, centralized student information systems, direct intervention by ministry staff, the need for ministerial sign-off on some things, and the accountability relationship with government (p. 37)

Yet there is a growing literature on board leadership and strategic capability that, in spite of changes in authority or control, suggests that boards play increasingly visible roles in school districts. Leithwood and McCullough (2016, p. 26) describe a 9-year research project in Ontario designed to identify and examine the characteristics of high performing districts. As part of the study, numerical data were gathered from 235 district leaders and 1,543 principals in 49 of the 72 school districts in the province. Data were also collected on average district-level changes in student achievement in mathematics and language in grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 over a five-year period. The researchers were able to establish impact on nine dimensions. They calculated the effects of what they termed Professional Leadership (directors and superintendents) and Elected Leadership (trustees). Interestingly, both had “moderate to strong effects on most dimensions” though Professional Leadership, not surprisingly, had larger effects on all but two dimensions. The importance of this to our discussion is that while the impact of elected trustees was less than that of professional staff, trustee actions were nonetheless positively linked to district gains.

An outcome of this study was the identification of nine practices of strong district leaders (pp. 28-29), which are important to list here:

- Establish broadly shared mission, vision and goals founded on ambitious images of the educated person.
- Provide coherent instructional guidance.
- Build district and school staffs' capacities and commitments to seek out and use multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions.
- Create learning-oriented organizational improvement processes.
- Provide job-embedded professional development.
- Align budgets, personnel policies/procedures and use of time with district mission, vision and goals.
- Use a comprehensive performance management system for school and district leadership development.
- Advocate for and support of a policy-governance approach to board of trustee practice. [In the description they refer to a "policy governance model of trustee practice" (p. 29), but since "policy governance" is not capitalized, I am uncertain whether they are singling out Carver's model or instead speaking of a generic approach to governance that focuses predominantly on policy.]
- Nurture productive working relationships with staff and stakeholders.

For comparison purposes, it is interesting to return to the components of school board leadership identified by MacLellan (2009, pp. 135-140), which in this manuscript are listed on pages 34-35. There is strong overlap in terms of the importance of vision, a concerted focus on instructional leadership, the centrality of data-based decision making, and creating effective learning circumstances that link to student achievement. There may be overlap in other areas

as well, although different language use precludes me from being confident in naming those connections.

Yet even with this confluence, there are reasons for caution. For example, there is much contemporary language around data-driven, or data-based, or evidence-based decision making. The principle appears sound: base decisions and actions on information derived from solid research. The tricky part is that not all data are created equal, as it were, and nor do they speak for themselves. In any given study, it is crucial to look at what counts as data (and what doesn't), how the study was designed and carried out (which impacts the interpretation of the results), and whether the results claimed by the authors are supported by the evidence they provide (not always the case; overstating or overgeneralizing happens). On any given board, who has the skills to provide this level of analysis? If no one, are there professional staff members in the district who do, or ministry consultants?

I have sat through countless meetings where individuals have said “the research says that...” or “we know from the data that...” or “evidence tells us that...” But when asked “what research?” or “what data?” or “what evidence?” responses are commonly vague. This is the great advantage of having the resources and the leadership commitment to undertake major literacy-focused studies like that conducted in York Region District School Board and described by Fullan & Knight (2011), as well as having the participation of professional researchers and scholars from the University of Toronto and other post-secondary institutions in the area. But not all boards have this or are in a position to undertake such resource-intensive research. Knowing what counts as data and how to interpret research results is only one of the many

reasons for advocating for strong professional development programs for board members (e.g., Fullan, 2016; Leithwood & McCullough, 2016).

Another caution concerns the exceptional prominence given to student achievement. This is an area for worthy debate, and also for a focus of comprehensive professional development. My point is not to deny its importance, but to understand carefully what it is, how it is being measured, what it means in a broader (beyond the measures) sense, whether it carries with it subtexts, such as competitiveness and, if so, the potential impact of these on learning environments. In an upcoming section on accountability, I refer to an article by Connell (2008, p. 190) and his call to cultivate “loving and cooperative school communities.” This language suggests a different focus, although it is conceivable that achievement and success in some forms could align with this orientation. I mention this not to suggest that Connell is right and others wrong, or that it is even about right and wrong. Decisions on appropriate educational programs for children and youth have to be made. Yet it is to state unequivocally that schools are many things, and that a prevailing discourse of what is important can inadvertently or otherwise silence other discourses, or direct attention away from learnings and learning environments that perhaps should be part of the healthy intellectual and emotional development of children and youth. This is necessary territory for public debate, and if one component of a school board’s role is to somehow “reflect the local,” as we saw previously, then it can usefully serve as a body that finds ways to actively engage citizens in these debates, which, parenthetically, research suggests is not easy (Land, 2002, pp. 235-236) other than perhaps in instances of hot-button issues. [If this is true, we can reasonably ask: why are citizens not more actively engaged in educational debates?]

Inner and Outer Workings

In many jurisdictions, board members are elected to their positions or appointed by elected leaders. In most cases, this means that school boards are *lay* boards rather than *specialized* or *expert* boards. The importance of lay boards has been elaborated previously in the foundations section on citizen involvement. But it is one overt way in which school boards may differ from many corporate boards, which commonly select members based on expertise or substantial corporate or other advantageous connections. Yet, in so differentiating, this runs the risk of missing the “capital” that does reside or develop within elected boards that can enrich and advance the work of the district.

In a highly informative research article on the sociology of school boards and the role of members’ social capital, Saatcioglu and Sargut (2014) employ the concepts of *closure* and *brokerage* to make sense of the value that members bring to board work. Closure refers to the internal relations, efficacy, and decision making excellence of the board; in effect, to the quality of board member relations (p. 43). Regarding closure, or rather the lack thereof, the authors noted that “internal dysfunction undermines productivity and aggravates turnover in school boards” (p. 44). Brokerage, on the other hand, identifies the diversity of school board members’ engagement with external groups, such as other school districts, agencies that link to the work of the district, and government, which affects “innovation, legitimacy, and support for the schools” (p. 43).

This framework was used to undertake a study of a representative sample of school boards and districts in Pennsylvania between 2004 and 2007 (p. 43). The researchers developed a questionnaire that operationalized validated measures of closure and brokerage, used a

standardized instrument that measured student achievement (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment), and also assimilated in the study community measures related to race, economic capital, and human capital (p. 56). The framework was constructed as a typology of social capital, which they indicated was adapted from a text on social capital (Burt, 2005, referenced on pages 46-47). The typology has four quadrants, which I describe below (p. 47):

(Q1) Low closure/low brokerage: divisive board with homogeneous external ties.

(Q2) Low closure/high brokerage: divisive board with diverse external ties.

(Q3) High closure/high brokerage: cohesive board with diverse external ties.

(Q4) High closure/low brokerage: cohesive board with homogenous external ties.

In schematics like these, the idealized or desired circumstance is commonly “high-high.” This typology is no different. Through their analyses, Saatcioglu and Sargut were able to demonstrate higher student achievement in quadrant 3 (Q3), that is, in circumstances of high closure and high brokerage (p. 68). They note (p. 68):

Closure is likely to improve outcomes because it helps achieve and reinforce harmony, efficiency, and unity of purpose. Brokerage is likely to be instrumental by exposing the board to new ideas and information, reducing uncertainty, fostering creativity, and mustering political and financial support from external actors. Implications of brokerage and closure for district-level academic performance are important also because these are critical issues in a policy context that emphasizes standardized testing and accountability.

I have focused attention on this one study because it speaks to the importance of two qualities of school boards, which are reinforced in the governance literature. One is obvious: a

cohesive board environment is crucial for effective board operation, one characterized by “trust, information exchange, and unity of purpose” (p. 69). Notably, this does not imply an absence of challenging debates. The less obvious quality relates to the importance of developing diversity of ties “to external actors as a source of innovation, know-how, and creativity in educational governance” (pp. 69-70).

In another study on the impact social capital on school district financial and academic outcomes involving two of the same researchers (Saatcioglu, Moore, Sargut, & Bajaj, 2011), the authors noted that “school boards that interact often with community organizations and institutions are found to be more effective in policy development and implementation” (p. 8). This is reinforced in a study by Ford and Ihrke (2016), in which they identify such factors as “strong community connections” and “connections across the system” as providing a condition for productive change (p. 88).

The other feature to recall about the Saatcioglu and Sargut research is the reported gains in student outcomes that they correlated with circumstances of high closure and brokerage. The results of research like this, and other similar studies, need to be studied extensively and examined in different situations, in the best traditions of theory testing and validation. In empirical studies, correlation of results is not causation. But it provides a framework on which to base further research, and points in one useful direction in the development of a comprehensive theory of school district governance.

CONTEXT

Situating

All public governing boards, by definition, work within a public context. Boards that operate as agents/agencies of central governments conduct their work both publicly and within the prevailing political context of the times. Regardless of this, the work of school boards continues in some manner. What changes is the way the work is impacted. Other than disbandment, changes emanating from shifting ideologies are most likely to affect the power sharing relationship between a board and its associated government ministry (latitude of authority, degree of autonomy) and the performance expectations of the board by the government (areas for which the boards is expected to be answerable).

In this section, I sketch a political ideology – neoliberalism – that has impacted boards in Nova Scotia and in all Western democracies since the latter decades of the 20th century, and a core mechanism – accountability – of that ideology that has most directly impacted school governance. To be clear, neoliberalism has had a broad impact on public education generally, through changing curriculum design and construction, to fluctuating labour market trends, to the implementation of standards and standardized testing, to the identification of measureable performance outcomes, to a resolute focus on student achievement or success, through government intervention directly into board work, and to increasingly centralized methods of control with a concurrent devolution of areas of responsibility. This plays out differently in different provinces, and can vary within provinces depending on the circumstances of a particular board and its relationship with government. But the broad brush strokes of neoliberalism that most directly influences the work of the board (as opposed to its impact

more broadly on teachers, administrators, and students) shows itself under the canopy of accountability and its many arms.

Neoliberalism

Connell (2008, p. 175) describes neoliberalism as “...the project of transformation under the sign of the free market that has dominated politics in the last quarter century, both in the global metropole (Western Europe and North America) and in most other parts of the world.” He argues that under the aegis of neoliberalism, cutting taxes has been a central tenet that has impacted public sector spending and the provision of public services (p. 176). Slater and Griggs (2015, p. 438) go further by arguing that education is viewed as “an indispensable source of profit” through neoliberal lenses. And Codd (2005, pp. 195-196) offers a frank assessment of its impact:

But neo-liberalism is also hostile to social democracy. This is not surprising given that the welfare state is the product of social democracy. It is the institutional embodiment of the struggle for citizenship rights: that is, rights to health, education and employment opportunities, within a social environment of collective responsibility and rational identity. In contrast, neo-liberalism emphasizes individual rights to property ownership, legal protection and market freedom, within a social environment of enterprise and competition.

In Codd’s view, changing (declining) economic circumstances has provided a basis of legitimation for government to assume a more active role in public education (p. 195). And Connell (2008, pp. 188-189) argues that changes brought about in public education have

substantially impacted parents: “Neo-liberal regimes, rejecting the principle of universal public education, subsidizing private schooling and child care, and corporatising public institutions, have created pressures on parents to operate as investors and consumers in a market, competitively maximizing family gains from education.” This is eerily reminiscent of the warnings of Barlow and Robertson (1994) over twenty years ago of the intrusion of business and corporate interests into education and its impact. Dominant ideologies act as powerful socializers and vehicles of enculturation, bringing about changes in discourse and normalizing new ways of thinking about schooling and the purposes of public education. As Halpin (1999, p. 227) asserts, “One measure of the incredible ideological impact then that marketized versions of schooling have had on the public consciousness is the degree to which they have come to seem the norm rather [than] an aberration.”

Changes in political ethos have had a discernible impact in Canada. In a discussion of education governance reform in Ontario in the first decade of the 21st century, Sattler (2012, p.5) suggests that under neoliberalism public education bore the brunt of criticism for what was viewed as the inadequate preparation of students for changing labour markets, and as a result, was tagged with contributing directly to the overall economic decline. This provided a basis for direct intervention of the state in schooling. As a consequence, modes of governance moved away from “fostering and enabling participatory democracy” to a situation where “local involvement becomes a mechanism to improve school performance and foster market competition” (p. 5). She describes the changes that have taken place in Ontario as “messy” rather than dramatic (p. 23), but with a trend toward greater centralization and increased accountability for student achievement (p. 20).

This brings with it a fundamental shift in the autonomy of school boards and diminishing scope of authority. In the pan-Canadian study conducted by Sheppard et al. (2013) on school board governance, this was one of the outcomes identified by their participants (p. 13). In their language, “one of the factors responsible for eroding school board autonomy in policy making appears to be the accountability relationship with government” (p. 37). Corbett (2008, p. 41) goes as far as to suggest that school boards, “as an organ of democratic governance, and as a site of collective educational authority,” present themselves as a problem for those, under neoliberalism, who argue for their demise.

As a counterpoint to this narrative, Connell (2008, p. 190) references research that provides an alternative conception of schooling, suggesting “...the importance of building good emotional environments in and around schools, i.e., developing loving and cooperative school communities.” He argues that this would place the focus on learning rather than competition (p. 190). [Connell’s reference to a different way of thinking about schooling is only one of a throng of scholars who offer alternate views to neoliberal constructions of public education. I reference few of them here, as it is a voluminous literature and not the particular focus of this report. But I insert this aside as a reminder of the importance of stepping outside of dominant discourses by opening a window to other ways of conceptualizing schooling, including the governance of school systems.]

Accountability

Along with standards, standardization, testing, competition, and achievement, accountability has assumed a prominent place in the lexicon of neoliberalist reform agendas. It

is difficult to locate an article on contemporary practices of educational governance, let alone governance in other public sector organizations and corporations, that doesn't speak of its increasing and central role (Bainbridge, 2008; Carver, 2006; Codd, 2005; Eisenhardt, 1989; Farrell & Law, 1999; Fitz, 2003; Galway et al., 2013; Gordon, 1995; Keay & Loughrey, 2015; Manzer, 1994; McDonagh, 2006; McLellan, 2009; Miller, 2002; Saatcioglu et al., 2011; Sheppard et al., 2013). A recent report by the Auditor General of Nova Scotia notes that "Governing boards function in an oversight role, part of which includes approving the strategic plan and supporting business plans" (Province of Nova Scotia, 2015, p. 8). This report chided the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for "not providing adequate oversight and monitoring of educational services delivered by school boards" (p. 10). In a Nova Scotia School Boards Association (2016) self-assessment guide, one of the eight listed characteristics of effective boards states that they "...are accountability driven, spending less time on management issues and more time focused on policies to improve achievement" (p. 8). And stepping beyond education into the field of nonprofit agencies, Seel and Iffrig (2006, p. 4) note that "Boards today operate in an environment that demands increased accountability to a variety of parties concerned with the success of the organization: government authorities, funders, clients, staff, individual donors, and the community."

There is nothing inherently inappropriate in principle about accountability. As mentioned previously, Farrell and Law (1999, p. 294) position it as central to any democratic form of governance. The challenge arises in not knowing what it is. In an informative article in a legal journal on accountability in corporative governance, Keay and Loughrey (2015, p. 235) note that "...there is neither an articulation of the essence of the concept nor substantial

explanation of the meaning that is sought to be conveyed by the word in relation to corporate governance.” They indicate that it has become fundamentally identified with good governance, but that as a result of its appeal, “...it is applied casually, perhaps to the point of thoughtlessness” (pp. 253-254). And it is a fundamental outgrowth of the so-called “agency problem” described in the next section.

One part of the problem is its meaning. Keay and Loughrey (p. 266), referring to a 2010 article by Bovens, suggest that it actually has two different connotations. The first is normative, seeing it as a quantity. That is, it is something that is measurable and ascribed to organizations that demonstrate good standards of governance. The problem is that there is a lack of consensus on these standards (p. 266). The second rendition of the concept describes it not as a product or quantity, but as a process. The process, described by Keay and Loughrey (pp. 266-268) has four components: (a) someone or some entity is called to account; to report on something, (b) the explanation must be based on some external set of standards or values, making it normative in nature, (c) the account can be challenged on the basis of those standards, and (d) there must be consequences.

These authors describe three forms of accountability: collective, individual, and role (p. 268). Applied to a school board, collective accountability could be a board asked to explain an undesirable or unexpected district outcome, such as students’ performance on literacy tests. An example of individual accountability could be a board member asked to answer for improper behavior in an episode that does not involve other board members. And in terms of role accountability, an entire board can be asked to justify actions that deviate from its mandate, or an individual member of a board can be likewise asked to account for not fulfilling her or his

role (e.g., board chair). On the surface, this may seem straightforward, but again difficulties arise in the details. Is the mandate of the board clear? Is the role of each board member sufficiently well described that role deviance would be obvious? Does the board have a clearly delineated process for self-discipline? In spirited debate, when does acceptable behavior cross the line to unacceptable behavior? And perhaps the most difficult: in what manner is a board to be held accountable for unacceptable levels of student achievement, however ascertained?

A last point raised by Keay and Loughrey (p. 269) is the issue of *ex post* and *ex ante* accountability. That is, is accountability action only manifest after something goes awry (*ex post*), or are there checks of on-going decision-making and other actions in progress (*ex ante*)? The issue with the former is that it may at that point be too late to alter an outcome (p. 276).

Manzer (1994, p. 227) quotes from a 1987 report by George Radwanski on drop-outs in Ontario: "There can be no effective pursuit of excellence in educational outcomes without meaningful accountability, and there can be no meaningful accountability without measurable standards of accomplishment." The debate is thus framed: what counts as "excellence in outcomes" and who decides, and what are the "measurable standards of accomplishment" and who decides? The same questions asked of the school district can be asked internally of the board itself: what standards apply to board practices and processes (e.g., meetings, decision making, advocacy, member behavior) and who decides?

In a deviation from the tenor of much of the language surrounding accountability, the authors of a commissioned report on school governance in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 13) frame accountability in a decidedly positive tone, not dissimilar to that recounted earlier by Connell: "School boards should be accountable for creating a caring,

compassionate school system that reflects the local culture, managing the board's resources effectively and ensuring that all students are prepared to have a successful life." While, again, the details are in the implied meanings, this nonetheless moves the language out from under the frequently negative discourse of agency theory (see page 55) and more under the enabling and empowering orientation of stewardship theory (see page 58).

In an article on educational reforms and teacher professionalism, Codd (2005, p. 203) moves in this direction by advocating for a form of accountability built on respect, but one that fully recognizes professional obligations:

The restoration of a culture of trust in education requires a form of accountability which enhances rather than diminishes the professionalism of teachers. This implies a form of accountability that recognizes the ethical obligation on the part of professionals to offer an account of (or a justification for) their actions. It is a form of accountability in which the moral agency of the professional is fully acknowledged. This implies an internal (high trust) form of accountability that differs significantly from the external (low trust) form of accountability that belongs within the various discourses of managerialism.

In the concluding section of this manuscript, I sketch a process by which this could happen with a specific focus on board governance, while simultaneously respecting collectively agreed upon forms of accountability.

THEORIES

Framing

My orientation in writing this section on theories is to draw on whatever theoretical and conceptual tools are available that can be usefully mined for consideration in educational contexts. Much of this work and many of the theories themselves – though not all – are housed in literatures on corporate governance and nonprofit organizations. The focus is delimited to four theories: agency theory, stewardship theory, institutional theory, and policy interdependence theory. I do this because these appear to me to offer the richest concepts for making sense of the ground underlying educational governance. In each case I give a brief overview of the theory and the more obvious concepts that potentially link to governance. Each contains a much deeper treasure-trove of concepts and frameworks than I have included here, some of which could usefully be mined for application to school governance. There are other theories that offer concepts that could be seen as useful, such as resource dependency theory (e.g., Brown, 2005; Muth & Donaldson, 1998) and stakeholder theory (e.g., Parmer et al., 2010; Vandewande, Voordeckers, Lambrechts, & Bammens, 2011), but the four reviewed here appear to cover much of the same conceptual ground and more.

Given the direct applicability of policy interdependence theory to education, it would make sense to begin there. But I have opted instead to proceed in a different order: agency theory, stewardship theory, institutional theory, policy interdependence theory. Like all social theories, these offer ways of making sense of human collective behavior. Agency and stewardship theories focus more narrowly on the nature of the relationship between those who are directly responsible for translating an organization's policies into action (the

employees, e.g., teachers, administrators) and the employer (e.g., school board, Department of Education and Early Childhood Education) or whatever body might be considered the “owner.” Institutional and policy interdependence theories have a broader focus. The former considers the influence of the values, norms, and overall culture of the organization (e.g., school district) and the impact of the cultures of interacting institutions (e.g., local health bodies and social service agencies). This overlaps on some dimensions with policy interdependence theory, which considers the circumstances where multiple public agencies (local and centralized) share policy making authority and control.

Agency Theory

According to Eisenhardt (1989, p. 58), agency theory originated in the 1960s and early 1970s in work among economists who were investigating risk sharing among individuals and groups. The theory rests on an assumption of human beings as self-interested and therefore in need of oversight to ensure that their personal interests do not override, sidetrack, or negate the interests of those for whom they work, or those who own the enterprise. Denet (2006, p. 176) indicates that this orientation is “more or less” a default assumption in the West, especially in economic circles, in seeing a person as a “sort of isolated and individualistic locus of well-being.”

A core circumstance arising from this self-interest assumption is conflict. As Brown (2005, p. 320) notes regarding corporate boards, agency theory “posits a conflict relationship between the board and the executives. It is the board’s duty to monitor the self-interested behavior of executives (that is, management) to ensure stakeholder (the owners’) interests.” It

accordingly bears a strong similarity to managerialism, described by Bainbridge (2008, p. 9) as “seeing the corporation as a bureaucratic hierarchy with tiers of professional managers who are free to promote and pursue their own interests.” Agency theory thus arises out of the “need” for managerial control (Muth & Donaldson, 1998) as a result of the separation of ownership and control (Hart, 1995). This is commonly identified as the “agency problem” (Luhman & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 39; Pande & Ansari, 2014, p. 57). And Keay and Loughrey (2015, p. 257) note, “Agency problems are probably the most well-rehearsed rationale for accountability, certainly in the last 30 years or so.”

In a sociological critique of the theory, and one that foreshadows its more likely manifestation in education, Shapiro (2005, p. 278) suggests that the main concern is not so much the intrusion of the personal interests of the agents, but rather the likelihood of goal conflict:

The real problem is that the agent is most likely serving many masters, many of them with conflicting interests. Even if the agent is able to silence his or her own interests, there is the matter of how to maneuver through the tangled loyalties he or she owes to many different principals and how to negotiate through their competing interests and sometimes irreconcilable differences.

This need for monitoring and oversight and control is not restricted to corporate bodies. In government and public institutions, agency theory not surprisingly rose in ascendancy alongside the advent of neoliberalism, with its clarion calls for debt reduction, expenditure efficiency, global competitiveness, and associated monitoring and control. As we saw previously, this has had a direct impact on schooling, beginning with the seemingly wide-spread

belief that schools were somehow to blame for the economic decline, and the ensuing reform initiatives which, however framed, keyed on the importance of market demands and trends, standardization, and accountability (Sattler, 2012).

In a direct application to education, Gordon (1995) describes a reform agenda in New Zealand in which principles of agency theory informed a process of school system decentralization and accompanying efforts by the state to control schools. This was framed within a neoliberal public sector reform agenda, described as “a small central state made up of a series of free-standing agencies, devolved school management tied to the state through a contract, emphasis on central formulas for determining entitlement to funds and services, and new processes of accountability” (p. 56). The democratic ideal of local governance ostensibly plays out through the formation of boards of trustees at the school level, but requiring boards to adhere to the state’s goals and with provisions for the Minister to disband a board for a variety of reasons connected to incompetence (p. 60). This resulted in what Gordon frames as a new relationship between boards and the state, with the former becoming agents of the latter (p. 62).

There is no question (in my mind) about the fidelity of the connection between agency theory and the neoliberal reforms in education of recent decades. There has been an increased emphasis on achievement and outcomes and associated measures to ensure that these outcomes are being met, even though there are significant questions about the efficacy of the measures used (e.g., Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002 p. 174), let alone the ends themselves. What is perhaps unfortunate is the underlying assumption of agency theory: individuals inclined to act out of self-interest. There are more convincing ways to make sense of those instances

where district performance varies from expectations without imagining that teachers and administrators, and perhaps governing board members themselves, are trying to circumvent government policy to satisfy their own needs. Nevertheless, government initiatives aimed at increasing control of educational processes and outcomes, regardless of underlying assumptions, can be seen as intruding on teacher professionalism and reducing the autonomy and authority of the school board.

Connecting

From a board governance perspective, agency theory invokes the central concepts of **monitoring** and **control**. Such monitoring and control is required by the “owner” of the board, which in the case of Nova Scotia’s public schools is the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. As such, each board clearly acts as an **agent of the state** and is obliged to it on at least a **performative** basis.

Stewardship Theory

Stewardship theory makes exactly the opposite assumptions about individual behavior (Seyama, 2015). According to Davis et al. (1997a, p. 24), “In stewardship theory, the model of man [*sic*] is based on a steward whose behavior is ordered such that pro-organizational, collectivist behaviors have higher utility than individualistic, self-serving behaviors.” Schillemans (2013, pp. 544-545), writing of the relationship between Dutch government departments and their various public agencies, sets out the contrasting assumptions with agency theory:

- Stewards are motivated by collective and social goals, and not necessarily by self-interest;
- In stewardship theory, interest of agents (employees) may lean towards or be the same as principals (owners), whereas in agency theory that are relatively more likely to clash;

- From an incentive perspective, agency theory is more likely to invoke financial inducements, whereas stewardship theory is more likely to see the use of praise and acknowledgement;
- Agency theory assumes a hierarchical high power distance relationship maintained by institutional power, whereas stewardship theory reveals a low power distance maintained by a “personal style of power.”

On this latter point, Schillemans (p. 545) states that “a low power distance and a personal style of leadership prevents stewards from distancing themselves from their principals and fosters bonds of loyalty and respect that decrease the need for control and oversight.” In other words, treat us respectfully and in an enabling manner, without invoking positional or other forms of hierarchical power, and we can more genuinely work together towards common goals.

Muth and Donaldson (1998, p. 6) use slightly different but helpful language to differentiate agency from stewardship approaches, with agency equated with managerial *control*, and stewardship equated with managerial *empowerment*. In corporate parlance, Heracleous and Lan (2012, p. 234) liken stewardship approaches to a *director primacy model*, where agents are to be trusted and assumed to act for the collective good.

One of the more interesting questions about stewardship theory is whether the members of a board have the capability – knowledge and expertise – to act as stewards (Muth & Donaldson, p. 6). While these authors pose this question within the corporate sector, it serves to highlight an important distinction between the two theories. That is, action through agency theory (monitoring and controlling) appears to carry with it no particular specialized knowledge requirements, as long as the outcome measures and expected actions are clearly

delineated and understood. Acting as a steward, however, seems to imply something deeper: an understanding of what is expected (outcomes) but also an awareness of most appropriate or likely ways of getting there and what it means to govern in empowering and enabling ways.

In a parallel vein, resource dependency theory sees boards acting as a type of resource for the organization, through specialized external contacts, technical competencies, and the ability to provide strategic direction (Brown, 2005, p. 322). This is more likely to be the *de facto* circumstance of corporate boards, where directors are commonly selected for the special skills or the backgrounds they bring. In the case of elected school boards, such competencies may or may not be present, suggesting the need for it to be developed *in situ*, and having the board members work in close partnership and trusting relationships with professional staff to empower and enable them in their work.

Connecting

From a board governance perspective, stewardship theory invokes the central concepts of **enablement** and **empowerment**. A board acting as a steward, while still an agent of the state, adopts roles that closely engage (either actively or passively) with the work of the district's staff, and are obliged to them, and to the local community, perhaps more on an **ethical** basis than a performative one.

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory holds a prominent position within management and organizational theory, and the two were originally closely connected (Greenwood, Hinings, & Whetter, 2014). Carver (2010, p. 150) describes institutional theory as addressing "...human behavior within institutions ('institutions' sometimes widely conceived) with respect not only to rational or formal rules, but also to cultural variables like symbols, beliefs, and human will." By including culture, institutional theory not only speaks to the importance of members of an organization

understanding and shaping their own culture, but it also broadens the lens to include cultural influences within the larger environments in which it exists, including local community cultures and the cultures of other institutions with which it cooperates (Young, Stedham, & Beekun, 2000). Luhman and Cunliffe (2013, p. 85) capture this by indicating that “institutional theory differs from other environmentally oriented theories because it incorporates social and cultural factors in terms of both generalized belief systems and more locally shared belief systems and pressures.”

In a text devoted to an understanding of institutional theory in political science, Peters (2005) introduces the geological concept of *sedimentation* as a way of thinking of the ways in which human action and organizational practices are layered in organizations:

[Sedimentation] reflects the characteristic of human life that current practices are built on the past and that beneath current practice in an organization there may be layers of values and understandings left from earlier times. Thus, if organizations or institutions were to be presented visually they might look like rocks drawn from the seabed in which layer after layer of deposits have accumulated and been solidified.

This analogy is particularly apropos to the earlier discussion of the role of *a priori* knowledge in board decision making and practices, as well as to the socialization of new board members by current members to a suite of traditional practices. It further connects to the incorporation of the importance of culture in the Coherent Governance model of Quinn and Dawson (2011) – although theirs is focused specifically on the board’s own culture – and as well as an implied connection through community values in the Global Governance model of Seel (2008).

In an application of institutional theory to educational policy, one that foreshadows the principles of policy interdependence theory, Burch (2007) pinpoints the multi-organization environment in which public schools work. He points out that “the agencies governing public schooling develop elaborate administrative structures. Over time, the elements of this complexity (e.g., high degrees of specialization in personnel) come to be understood as the critical components of public school governance.” Referring to a case study of a school district in the United States, he writes that “...district office staff members represented only one of the policy actors central to the implementation of policy. Nongovernmental organizations interacting within the district also exerted significant influence on reform trajectories as carriers of broader cultural norms” (p. 91). And drawing on a concept housed within organizational theory, Burch (p. 85) refers to the ways in which the practices that take place in schools and boards are frequently “loosely coupled” from the intentions of policy makers. These points set the stage for the central treatise of policy interdependence theory.

First, however, there is an aspect of culture that needs to be pedestalled: its invisibility. That is, once practices and processes become routinized and part of everyday discourse in an organization, they become normalized. This can have the effect of placing them beyond scrutiny, effectively becoming “the way we do things around here.” While it is rarely as simple as everyone acting as if there were no other way to do the work of the organization, the existence of entrenched practices can make it difficult to raise alternative viewpoints. If this is coupled with a view of conflict in groups or organizations as pathological and in need of fixing, those who challenge the status quo can find themselves silenced or marginalized and the potential benefits of a “heated but healthy dialogue” lost.

Connecting

From a board governance perspective, institutional theory spotlights the important concepts of **norms, values, and culture**. It also brings a central awareness of **inter-organizational linkages**. Focusing on culture offers boards the advantage of not only understanding and shaping their own, but also opens a window to the complexities and impact of subcultures within their districts and the agencies with which they collaborate and partner.

Policy Interdependence Theory

Policy interdependence theory derives from the 1994 Canadian text, *Public schools and political ideas: Educational policy in historical perspective*, by Ronald Manzer, although, as he indicates, it was first articulated in the Parent, Hall-Dennis, and Worth reports of the 1960s and 1970s (p. 196). In the introductory section of the text, Manzer (p. 3) describes the circumstance of public schools:

Sometimes public schools are built and maintained entirely on the basis of community consensus. More often, however, schools are stakes in struggles for political power. Educational politics and policy-making are rent by conflicting political, economic, and cultural interests that seek to organize schools to fit particular conceptions of a good community and a good life and to teach knowledge and skills serving particular interests, or at least particular conceptions of the public interest.

Against this background he describes the complex social and political circumstances of educational policy making and lays the foundation for policy interdependence theory (p. 27):

...the theory of policy interdependence holds that the territorial boundaries of public policies are not easily or permanently identifiable for allocations among agencies of government with appropriate territorial jurisdictions. Hence, central and local governments must have concurrent authority and decide jointly.

Manzer describes the nature of the relationship between central and local governments as like a “marble cake” rather than a “layer cake” (p. 27). This metaphor of the infused multi-agency system lucidly, if tacitly, platforms the concepts central to the three previous theories and the complex circumstances and multiple ways in which they can play out. At the risk of carrying the metaphor too far, different relationship scenarios may result in a very flavorful marble cake or a rather bitter one, or some concoction in between.

Leading up to his description of policy interdependence and the marble cake metaphor, Manzer (pp. 24-25) identifies four other relationship arrangements between central and local governments. One of these is *administrative agency*, where the local government is essentially viewed as an arm of the central government, reminiscent of agency theory. At an opposite pole is *communal autonomy*, where local communities are autonomous and self-govern many of their public activities, which includes education. This is the participatory democracy piece, but it also hints at circumstances in which stewardship theory can/does apply, a connection I will elaborate upon later.

What Manzer’s work does exceptionally well is to position the history of reforms in education in Canada against the political backdrop of the times, and explore in depth the local-central decision making challenge of educational governance and the way it has played out across the country. As we have seen in the contemporary context, neo-liberalism, which Manzer appears to frame in terms of four liberalisms – political, economic, ethical, and technological (pp. 256-269) – has spawned a wave of educational reforms with agendas that reflect this ideology. This should come as no surprise for any government-initiated reform action. But against this, he both overtly and tacitly throughout the text frames educational

policy making as a multi-agency relationship activity, which in so doing keys on the central importance of relationship-building and role clarification. In educational governance, this extends well beyond the relationship between a government ministry and a local school board to other board-connected relationships: with the district's senior leadership team; with professional and support staff; with parents; with the community at large, however defined; with other agencies having work that overlaps, enhances, or supplements the work of the district.

From a board governance perspective, policy interdependence theory describes the complex circumstances in which multiple agencies shape educational policy. In so doing, it pedestals the crucial role of **relationship building** and the need to negotiate **areas of authority, role clarification**, and the boundaries of **board autonomy**.

Reflection

It would be easy to conclude that perhaps policy interdependence theory covers the necessary ground for understanding and framing school board governance, especially since it is explicitly about public schools. It certainly speaks to the importance of understanding existing socio-political circumstance as a basis for making sense of government (change) initiatives. It also embeds the school board as one of the players in educational policy formation and the importance of relationship building with all organizations that influence district policy development and implementation, central government being only one. It further highlights the idea of agency-type relationships, and the scenario of boards acting on behalf of government as overseers of policy. But in my view it doesn't provide, for example, the depth of understanding of *culture* opened through institutional theory window, or an exploration of how boards can act in *empowering* and supportive ways that is central to stewardship theory. And there is another

component of board work to which policy interdependence theory doesn't appear to speak explicitly: the internal functioning and dynamics of the board itself. For these reasons, it might more appropriately be seen as an important component in the development of a school board governance theory, to which other pieces are added.

BRINGING TOGETHER

Structure

In this concluding section, I endeavor to accomplish two tasks: (1) to synthesize and extract from the "findings" of this review, utilizing the three components of the mandate as a structure for doing so; and (2) to employ concepts from the theories described within the body of the manuscript as a vehicle for modestly demonstrating how theorizing governance in Nova Scotia could be used to ultimately develop a theory of school board governance.

I include the second task, which uses the third mandate as a stepping-stone to something bigger, because I believe there is an opportunity to position Nova Scotia as a type of worksite in which to engage a process of theorizing governance in the service of eventually developing a comprehensive theory of school board governance. This is an area of public schooling that is arguably under-researched but most certainly under-theorized, and there is an opportunity to change that.

Revisiting the Mandate

- a) To identify the most significant theories, underlying assumptions, and/or conceptual frameworks that link to school board governance;**

There is no global theory of governance and no agreed-upon theory of school district governance that I have been able to locate. One could argue, as Brandon (2016) has done, that policy interdependence is such a theory. I understand the basis for this argument, especially since unlike all other theories it derives from and focuses explicitly on the circumstances of public schooling in Canada. But, in my reading, it is not so much a theory of boards themselves as it is a theory of the structure within which boards function. In other words, it is a theory of what it says it is: policy interdependence; the complexity of different regulatory bodies participating in the joint governance of education. It doesn't theorize the internal workings of boards, such as the roles they should/could play in relation to the districts they govern, or the roles that should/could be played in terms of those who elect or appoint them. It theorizes their circumstance but not their anatomy. That said, the case I will make is that in combination with other theories it provides a framework in which to develop a deeper theory of school board governance that not only embeds boards within their political multi-agency context (the external governance piece), but also outlines an approach to their internal functions and alignment (the internal governance piece).

Three other theories were described in this manuscript: agency theory, stewardship theory, and institutional theory. Agency theory was included because it describes the relational nature of having one body, a school board, act on behalf of another body, government. By name or not, it serves as the underlying basis for expectations of monitoring and accountability. Stewardship theory was included because it offers a counterpoint to agency theory. Its language carries with it notions of caring for and tending to, as well as enabling and empowering; language that seems particularly fitting for an enterprise that is about children

and youth. “Accountability” in agency theory becomes “responsibility” in stewardship theory. Both speak directly to board responsibilities, but they speak differently. Lastly, institutional theory was included because it carries with it the concepts for helping to make sense of how things work within an organizational setting. This includes understandings of internal cultures and the importance of values and beliefs. Each of these theories, along with policy interdependence theory, provides underlying assumptions and premises that inform, and can potentially inform more powerfully, school board governance.

In brief, school board governance plays out in institutional settings (institutional theory), involving the development and implementation of policy within a multi-agency context (policy interdependence theory), in a circumstance where they are, in effect, acting on behalf of others in ways that play out differently depending on how they are oriented and mandated (agency theory and stewardship theory).

In synthesizing the Foundations section, we saw that there is wide-spread support for local participation in public education. While there have been aberrations, it is essentially an underlying assumption built on the principles of participatory democracy. How these bodies are structured – district boards, trustees, or advisory councils – and whether individuals are elected to them or appointed, the voices in support are louder than the voices opposed. The rationale for this, beyond being considered a democratic freedom or right, resides in the idea of schools as reflecting “community values” and, since they exist to educate the children of local families, community members should exercise some measure of direct control over them.

There are (at least) two issues that arise from local participation. The first is determining what constitutes “local values” and how they should or should not factor into the practices of

school governance, and the second, quite likely connected to the first, is the recognition that bringing citizens together to debate the education of their children will occasionally, perhaps frequently, result in disagreement and vigorous debate, and on rare occasion, dysfunction and implosion. The latter can happen in any collective decision making structure, and only requires an agreed-upon process for self-discipline and, in extreme situations, an agreed-upon process for external intervention.

b) To identify the unique challenges facing school boards

At the beginning of this manuscript I included a quotation from Carver (2006) that outlined the unique circumstances of school boards (see page 10). I won't reproduce it here, other than to say at this endpoint that I believe what I said earlier; it is not overstated. It should come as no surprise that any collection of people brought together to provide oversight and direction for an organization can, and likely will, encounter the sorts of difficulties that were spotlighted in the Practices section: (a) within-group challenges that can arise from *a priori* or tacit knowledge and beliefs about that way things should operate; (b) ambiguity associated with working out a precise role, especially since boards have no daily responsibility for carrying out the work of the district, unlike full-time employees; (c) determining what sorts of leadership responsibilities they have and what structures best allow these to be enacted; (d) dealing with the internal necessity of harmony and shaping a shared vision and action plan, and (e) ascertaining what role they should play in connections with cognate organizations.

As stated earlier, I did not provide an overview of all aspects of board practices and processes. However, I did key on role ambiguity (pages 31-38) for a reason: it arose more commonly in a search of databases and scholarly works on board governance than any other

single aspect of board operation. In many ways the other subsections of Practices – *a priori* knowledge, leadership, and inner and outer workings – are subsets of it. Everything relies on it. Lack of certainty concerning its role does not bring the work of the board to a halt, but it surely lays the groundwork for discord and indecision, and in so doing leads potentially to board meetings that are less focused and efficient than they might otherwise be. This is admittedly speculative on my part, although I did cite literature that addressed it. It nonetheless strikes me as tautological: lack of clarity broadly leads to lack of clarity specifically.

My sense is that role ambiguity plays out in internal dynamics as a result of not being clear at this broader level. If the board is an agent of government – which it is – is its primary role one of oversight and monitoring? If the board is a representative of its communities – which it is – is its role one of ensuring the presence of local values and stewarding its schools in ways that nurture its children? Positioning it dichotomously like this is inaccurate and unfair, for it is not the case that government has only one agenda, any more than it is the case that communities have only one set of values. But it is the case that these two ways of thinking about district governance can cause angst, uncertainty, and potentially conflict for school board members, in the absence of any clear direction or operational framework.

This discussion is complicated not only by the unique circumstances of school boards, but also by the way political ideologies alter the conditions and roles of public agencies. Neoliberalism came through strongly in the literature as an ideology that has fundamentally inscribed new language into the role of public institutions. In the case of schooling, the advent of new curricula, use of standardized tests, and specification of expected outcomes has been part of the wave of neoliberalism (Slater & Griggs, 2015; Thomson & Holdsworth, 2003). All of

this affects boards. But the most significant conceptual shift has been in the rising prominence of accountability and what it entails. As I demonstrated earlier, what it entails is not always clear, but that has not stopped it from becoming a central piece of the educational discourse over the last few decades, which, as Keay and Loughrey pointed out (cited earlier) has likely contributed to its vagueness.

Once again, however, like role ambiguity for board members, lack of clarity creates a cloud of uncertainty around accountability. But even more than this, the manner in which it is invoked is frequently negative. This is not a necessary condition of the word, but it is, in my opinion, how it has evolved in public discourse. I earlier associated it with agency theory, and contrasted it with the word “responsibility,” which might more likely be associated with stewardship theory. Ironically, accountability and responsibility are synonyms, and yet they convey different meanings.

In research, conceptual clarity is crucial. In fields of practice, while it may not be framed in this language, clarity of role/purpose (for instance) comes down to the clarity of the language used to frame the role and how it is understood.

c) To demonstrate potential ways in which these findings can be used to further clarify and support school board governance practices.

There are probably many ways in which the findings from this study can be used. Yet much that I have written to this point leads me to conclude that role clarification is central to the effective and efficient operation of school boards. It is perhaps the case that this is unproblematic for some boards. Through a combination of good leadership, extensive dialogue, and positive partnership arrangements with relevant government agencies and with the

administrative leadership teams within their own districts, the work of some boards is imaginably seamless. But role ambiguity has arisen enough in the literature to name it as a general concern.

This sets the stage for a way of thinking about and clarifying board governance in Nova Scotia, and provides an exceptional opportunity to study it in some considerable detail, in a way that can be beneficial to all stakeholders, and ultimately to children and communities. Perhaps I am naïve or idealistic in this belief, but I briefly sketch out in the concluding section one way in which this could happen.

LOOKING AHEAD: THEORIZING AND THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Multiple Roots

One of the dangers of attempting to apply existing theories in their entirety to novel circumstances is captured by the square-peg-round-hole adage. It frequently doesn't work or it doesn't work well or it doesn't *seem* to work well. This isn't particularly surprising, since theorizing and theory development arise out of attempts to make sense of problems or dilemmas that exist in particular contexts, and not necessarily the context in which they are being applied. The challenges of doing this are especially exacerbated in social science inquiries, where researchers are trying to make sense of issues that pertain to or grow out of the complexities of intentional and unintentional human action and interaction. It is further exacerbated by paradigm boundaries that in some cases, in spite of the increasing popularity of mixed methods research, can be impermeable.

My way of dealing with this is to adopt the role of the *bricoleur* (Fr: handyman), a concept used within some disciplines within the social sciences to argue in favour of drawing from multiple theoretical and methodological traditions in attempting to make sense of a phenomenon, and not viewing it through only one conceptual lens (e.g., Arnold, Edwards, Hooley, & Williams, 2012; Di Domenico, Haugh, & Tracey, 2010; Selkrig, 2014). This is particularly apropos in a field like school district governance where there is no established predominant theory, with apologies to advocates of policy interdependence theory. I have adopted this approach throughout by reaching into diverse literatures and drawing on theories outside of education, and I utilize it here to demonstrate the potential gains of a longitudinal program of theory development in district governance in Nova Scotia.

A Framework

There are multiple ways to think about the generation of theory. Carver (2010, p.150), in an argument for the development of a global governance theory, indicates that it needs to be driven by the *purpose* of the board and not by an analysis of its current practices. There is wisdom in this, in my opinion, but I believe it could end up ignoring important contextual circumstances of governance. On the other hand, grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), popular in many social science disciplines and certainly as a method of qualitative research in education, builds directly from the experiences of people in research settings through a careful analysis of data sources such as interview transcripts and document analyses, through increasingly abstracted stages of coding and category formation to a point of saturation, and ultimately to the creation of a theoretical framework that purportedly explains the

phenomenon under investigation. I have used this extensively in my own research, but the framework below comes from a different place, for a different reason.

In a text on theory building in educational research, Kettley (2010) describes in great detail an approach to theory construction that is informed by principles integral to the School of Sociology at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom. It is called Synthetic and Transformative Theory Building (STTB), and I believe it holds substantial utility as a research framework. I won't go into detail on the components of it – there are many – but I will extract some of what I understand to be its central principles and apply it to a potential study of school governance. I will do this in a type of shorthand, and hope that I have not misrepresented it.

First, the name itself. STTB is *synthetic* in that it attempts to transcend entrenched paradigm traditions within the social sciences (such as quantitative versus qualitative research), and open researchers to knowledge from all sources, all of which is open to conjecture and refutation (p. 87). It is *transformative* in that it must focus on significant problems in schools (p. 87). In Kettley's language, "Educational research should have as its prime purpose the development of powerful understandings of social problems as a means to resolve them" (p. 87). These are what he calls "foreshadowed problems" because they have already been identified through previous research or by other means, the concepts and findings of which can be "brought to bear to assist in comprehending the possible forms, qualities and causes of problems" (p. 114). A framework for enacting STTB is charted by Kettley (p. 118), and while the details of it are not important at this stage, it begins with "deep readings" and progresses through the "framing of foreshadowed problems," to the development of "cross-paradigm research aims," and on to the development of research instruments, data collection, analytical

procedures, interpretation, application, to the development of substantive theory and recommendations for problem solving. STTB is commonly longitudinal in nature. This is different in (important) details from some other approaches to theory building, but it has similar aims.

If the approach I advocate below were adopted, the first “deep reading” would be of Kettley’s framework, but that would lead to a significant exploration of the “foreshadowed problem” that is the focus of the research. What I like about this framework is:

- It is **problem driven**, with a goal of producing a testable theory that directly addresses difficulties in fields of practice;
- It seeks **strong explanations**, by which Kettley means ones that account for the deep causes of the problems being studied. [He argues throughout the text, in a controversial fashion, that many educational theories lead to only weak explanations of schooling, and that when these are translated into policy they “almost invariably lead to inappropriate, ineffective or damaging curriculum innovation strategies” (p. 167).]

An approach

In the spirit of STTB, I believe that school board role ambiguity can serve as an excellent focus of a longitudinal research study in Nova Scotia, involving multiple research strategies and many if not all stakeholders in the school governance enterprise. It is most assuredly a “foreshadowed problem” as it is commonly identified in the literature. Using role ambiguity as a focus has the potential to result in a theory of governance role. It will not result in a global

governance theory of the sort Carver advocates, but it can most assuredly be a cornerstone of such a theory.

There are two exceptionally important requirements. The first is that all education partners, but most especially participating school boards, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Nova Scotia School Boards Association, and the Association of Nova Scotia Educational Administrators must be full participants. There is no point in pursuing an ambitious goal such as this if, for example, the DEECD is not an active participant. The Department has the power and legislative right to narrowly (or widely) mandate the role of school boards. But it does not have the power to mandate how board members should feel about their role, or how they should reconcile tensions that pull them in different directions. Having the Department as part of the dialogue around the details and activities of this study would provide the study with a legitimacy that it would otherwise lack. The same can be said of the other partners.

The second crucial requirement is that there needs to be an agreed-upon approach to governance that serves as a test case, if you will. That is, district governance must be framed by key concepts that guide its application. My suggestion is not to advocate for any one of the theories that I reviewed in this study, for that would violate my own admonition around square pegs and round holes. But I think we can draw concepts from these theories to build an approach to which all partners can agree (made in Nova Scotia, if you will), while at the same time respecting their individual mandates. Again, referring to the Department, there is little point in pursuing a study of school governance that blatantly ignores its need for school board accountability as per the recent admonitions from the Auditor-General. But there is equally no

point is undertaking a study that does not address the tensions that many boards and board members already feel.

I outline a possibility in point form below:

- The foreshadowed problem is **role ambiguity** of school board members;
- All of the theories described speak to different aspects of school board governance. My sense is that it would be appropriate to utilize in particular some of the core concepts from **stewardship theory** to frame a board-specific approach to governance. I say this because, in my reading, it has the greatest potential to be positively received by all partners, while at the same time meeting legislative requirements, like accountability (spun differently) that may be especially important to the Department and that addresses the requirements of the Auditor General. In this way, substantial discussion would need to occur among all participants around what it would look like at the board level to operationalize concepts like enablement and empowerment. There would need to be deep readings around stewardship theory, but not for the purpose of a “fidelity application” (lock, stock, and barrel) of the theory, but rather to mine it for all the concepts that might form an appropriate approach to school board governance in Nova Scotia.
- The same approach of deep reading would relate to agency theory, institutional theory, policy interdependence theory and, for that matter, any other approaches partners identify as relevant. The idea here, in the spirit of STTB, is to look everywhere and discuss everything, and not be wedded to a particular

approach or paradigm or methodology, but to ultimately agree upon something and commit to both implementing and concurrently studying it.

- The design of a longitudinal study – which means long-term – would require extensive discussion and agreement on methods and procedures, but all within a framework that ignores disciplinary and paradigmatic boundaries and seeks to draw from any location that holds substantial promise in deepening the work.

Doing this would take substantial commitment from all partners to locate and generate resources (financial, human), provide representatives to be part of a research design team, and, most importantly, to commit to the long term. The potential payoff is substantial. Not only could it result in the development of a theory of school board role that might directly “solve” role ambiguity, but it holds the side benefit (once again, perhaps only in my idealistic mind) of bringing all Nova Scotia partners/stakeholders together in a dialogue on an approach to school district governance that can substantially benefit everyone, and most especially students.

Closing Comment

I have selected role ambiguity as an intensive focus for a study that could produce substantial benefits. It may be that there is a greater problem that needs addressing in district governance in Nova Scotia. That would be fine. Regardless of focus, the heart of what I have sketched has four explicit components and one implicit component. The explicit components are that it must be focused on a foreshadowed problem, the solution to which would greatly enhance school system governance in Nova Scotia. It must involve extensive and diverse readings and study in order to develop deep understandings of the problem and ways of

addressing it. It must also involve “an approach” to governance that has a clear conceptual orientation and strongly affiliated practices. And it must necessarily involve, perhaps in various capacities, all key partners in school district governance.

The implicit component, and one that has served as a subtext throughout this paper, is that deep theory is not esoteric or something to scoff at or run from, but rather something that, if well done, brings clarity and form to what otherwise may be simply a collection of learned (socialized) practices. There is nothing wrong with learned practices, especially if they are productive. But to categorize practices as productive means to do so against some standard or explicit framework. In the absence of this, what may seem good or feel good may not *really* be particularly helpful or productive from an institutional objectives perspective; perhaps benign, perhaps worse. Good practices that have a deeply informed theoretical framework are effectually different than good practices that don’t. In the latter case, the rudderless ship comes to mind. It still floats, but wherever the winds and currents take it.

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