



Who's in charge? After thirty years of Tomorrow's Schools, are decisions really being made by the community?

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Abstract

This article examines the power balance that exists between principals and the community within schools in New Zealand. The effectiveness of the decision making process within BoT of Trustees is measured against the socio-economic index (decile) that has been assigned to each school by the Ministry of Education using New Zealand Statistics data. A survey was designed to collect the demographic data of trustees and measurements of effective decision making, and compare them to the decile of each respondent and a definition of effective governance. The article finds that there is a positive link between decile and effective decision making. School BoT in more privileged areas experience more effective decision making. The gender, age, and ethnicity of trustees are also linked to socio-economic outcomes in that there are fewer ethnic minorities found on the BoT of lower decile schools. The structures that the Education Act 1989 established over 30 years ago have created these inequities, particularly for the underprivileged and for small rural schools. It is recommended that the taskforce reviewing of the Education Act takes these inequities into account and creates

structures that allow lower socio-economic communities to be empowered and for small communities to thrive.

Introduction and Background

This article examines the roles and relationships within New Zealand school Boards of Trustees (BoT). Specifically, we explore the dynamic between school principals and elected community representatives in the South Island following major reforms initiated following the Picot Report (1988). The major thrust of these reforms implemented in 1989 were designed to empower communities or consumers - principally parents - at the expense of professional educators.

There is a clear linkage between the Picot inspired reforms and the general thrust of the significant public management reforms which transformed New Zealand in the 1980's (Boston 1996) (Kelsey 1995). Whilst here is not the place to revisit those reforms, they have been admirably chronicled elsewhere as being part of the New Public Management (Hood, 1991) or 'managerialism' drive (Pollitt 1993) which saw the rise of consumerism and management within public service provision.

In 1988, the New Zealand government announced intention to reform the education system and appointed businessman Brian Picot to propose a new structure (Picot et al, 1988). The report recommended a series of changes that devolved decision making and responsibility from the state to individual schools within the community. This reflected a clear shift away from collective decision making to a model founded on the notion of the individual rights of the consumer

(Hughes, 2003). At the heart of these reforms was the theoretical ideal that public services were producer driven and delivered in a Fordist manner (Brooke 1991). What was therefore needed to break this producer dominant model, was the transfer of power to service consumers – in the case of education, the parents of school children.

As was the case elsewhere in public service reform, the vehicle chosen to transfer power from producers to consumers of education was to replicate the private sector business model so revered by advocates of government reform in the 1980s (c.f. Hood, 1991; Hughes, 2003; Pollitt, 1994). In the case of school, parents would form a BoT which would act as the ‘BoT of directors’, to which the principal would be accountable, in a role akin to that of a chief executive officer. The BoT would be responsible for ‘hiring and firing’ the principal, and would wield considerable power within the school.

There were however a number of weaknesses in the public management reform model in general, which led to key failings in the application of the Picot ideals. Given that the public management reforms are founded upon public choice theory and rational actor economics (Hughes, 2003), there is an underlying assumption that all schools and parents are equally capable and willing to undertake the shift in operating model envisaged by Picot. We would contend that this is a serious flaw in the reforms. Specifically not only do socio-economic factors impact upon a communities abilities to form an effective BoT, even where this is possible,

there will still be a distinct membership hierarchy, with the school principal holding a dominant position on the BoT. This power imbalance is outlined thus: “... many forms of collaborative governance strongly favour the wealthy, the more educated, and those who belong to dominant racial and ethnic groups.” (Bevir 2012)

Hence, a key area this article address is to what extent do the issues outlined above exist some 30 years after the Tomorrows Schools reforms.

Background – PICOT: Parents In Charge Of Teachers

The framework created in 1989 set out to ensure that decision makers were as close to the effects of their decisions as possible (Lange 1988) The policy meant that parents would elect a BoT from the community to govern over school finances and act as employers (Picot et al. 1988). The main instrument of these reforms was the creation of BoT. These would be elected groups of parents that would be accountable for the allocation of an operational grant from the Ministry of Education. Under the new legislation elected members of the community would appoint the principal and act as the employer. Along with the help of external expertise, BoT would appraise the principals performance. The BoT would hold the principal accountable for the management of the school and have the authority to dismiss the principal if needed.

Decile: Categorising BoT, schools, and communities

Since 1995 the Ministry has categorised schools by decile according to the socio-economic status of their communities (Donnelly 2003). This index is derived from the socio economic status of the students that attend. The purpose of the decile system is to target funding towards lower socio-economic groups.

The decile label provides a useful measurement to describe a school BoT for this article. A decile rating tells us about the social advantages that a community may enjoy. It is important to note that the decile rating is consistently misunderstood as a quality rating by many members of the public (Donnelly 2003). High decile schools are located next to expensive real estate, and it's widely believed that the houses are expensive because the schools are good. However, it could be argued that the reverse is true.

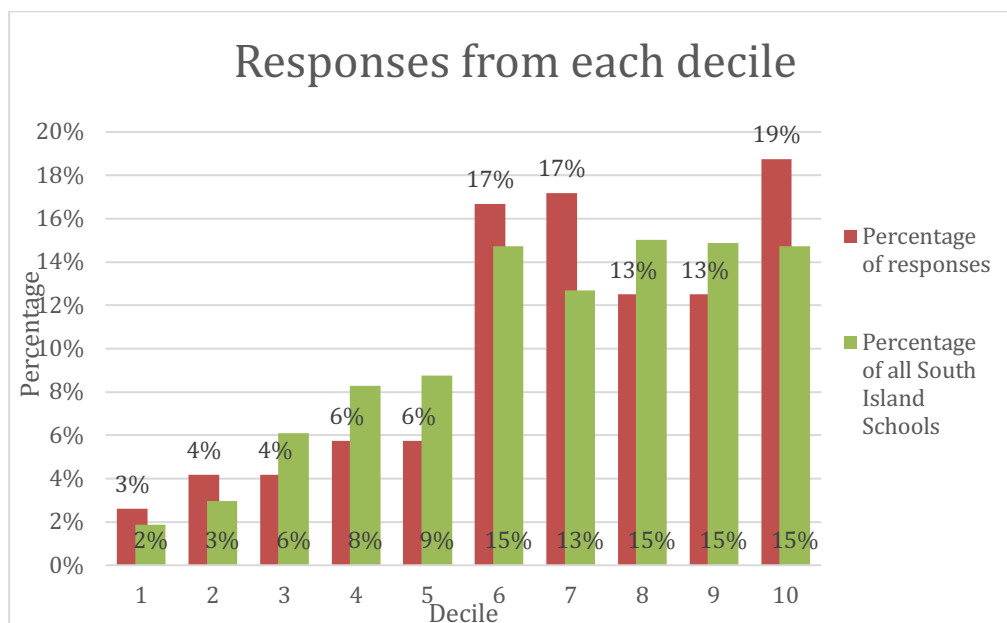
Method

To avoid any potential conflicts of interest, we sought to exclude schools located on North Island. Ergo using Survey Monkey, we sought to ascertain responses to a series of questions from some 588 South Island schools to a range of questions which explored issues around the objectives outlined in Tomorrows Schools. We analysed responses from principals and BoT members by school decile in order to ascertain differences in schools of different socio-economic composition. Essentially respondents were asked if the objectives of Tomorrow's Schools were met – specifically were 'communities making decisions about the future of children' – or was power still in the hands of the professional educators in the form of the school principal?

Demographic data

A total of 199 responses were collected. Among the categories of external appointments, staff trustees, and student trustees, 38 principals responded (only 32 completed the survey) and 120 elected members. Figure 1 shows the percentage of South Island schools in each decile, and the percentage of responses from each decile. It is important to note that 2% of South Island schools are decile 1 and 15% are decile 10. This is because decile is calculated nationally. This demonstrates the concentration of a higher socio-economic population in the South Island. The responses from decile 1 have been omitted from some the charts. There were 5 responses from decile 1 trustees (from 8 decile 1 schools in the South Island). Of the respondents, 4 were Ministry appointed so they have been coded as outliers.

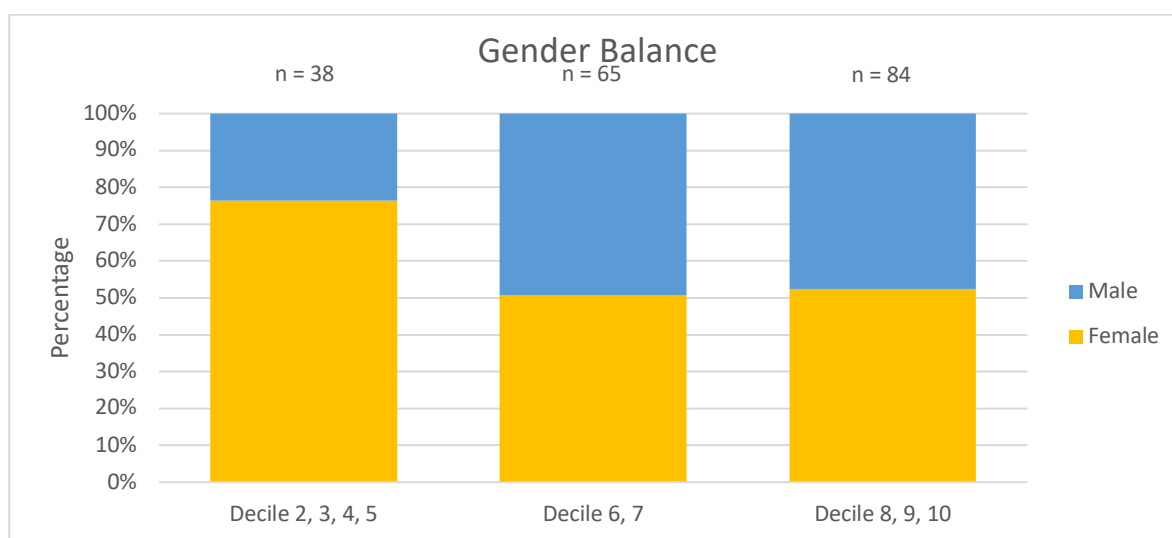
Figure 1 Responses from Each Decile



Gender

Figure 2 shows that there are more women in lower decile BoT, and they are younger – increasing the power difference within the BoT. The Ministry for Women (2016) asserts that while steady progress has been made to eliminate discrimination against women, there is much work to be done. If women face the same the prejudices in a BoT that they do in the rest of their life, such as unconscious bias (Ministry for Women 2017), lower decile BoT memberships do not have the same voice as high decile BoT memberships.

Figure 2 Gender Balance



Age

Table 1 shows that elected trustees are generally a decade younger than principals. A possible explanation could be that they should be current parents of school aged children. The average age of a male principal is 50. The average age

of a female principal is 56. Male and female elected trustees are 46 and 34 respectively.

Table 1 Average age of Principals and Elected Trustees (weighted average method)

	F e m a l e P r i n c i p a l	M a l e P r i n c i p a l	F e m a l e T r u s t e e	M a l e T r u s t e e
n	1	1	6	5
=	7	4	8	1



A	5	5	3	4
v	6	0	4	6.
e	.	.	.	4
r	7	7	2	7
a	6	1	6	
g				
e				
a				
g				
e				

The age and gender of both principals and BoT is shown in Figures 3 and 4 respectively. If age and gender are a factor in BoT power balance, then these figures illustrate that there is a generational difference between an average female principal and an average female trustee.

Figure 3 Principals by Gender and Age

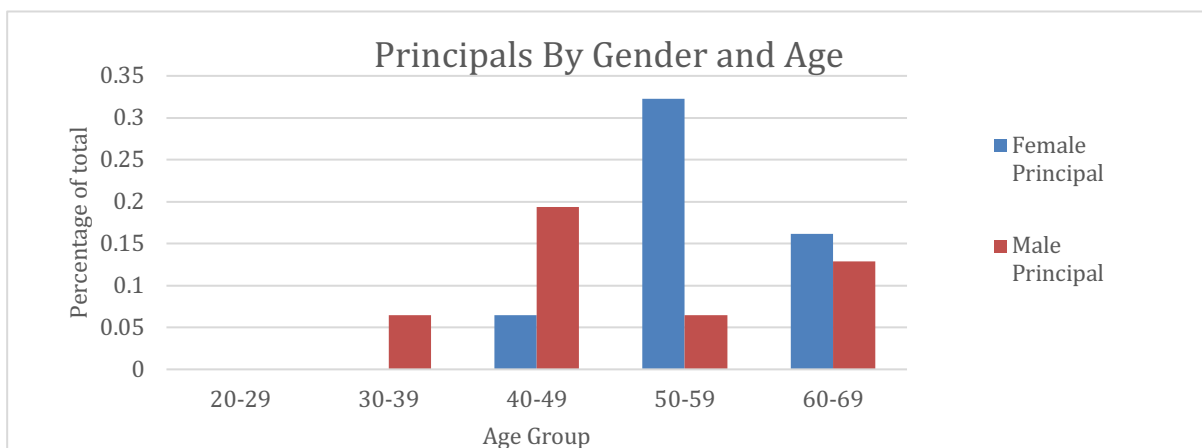
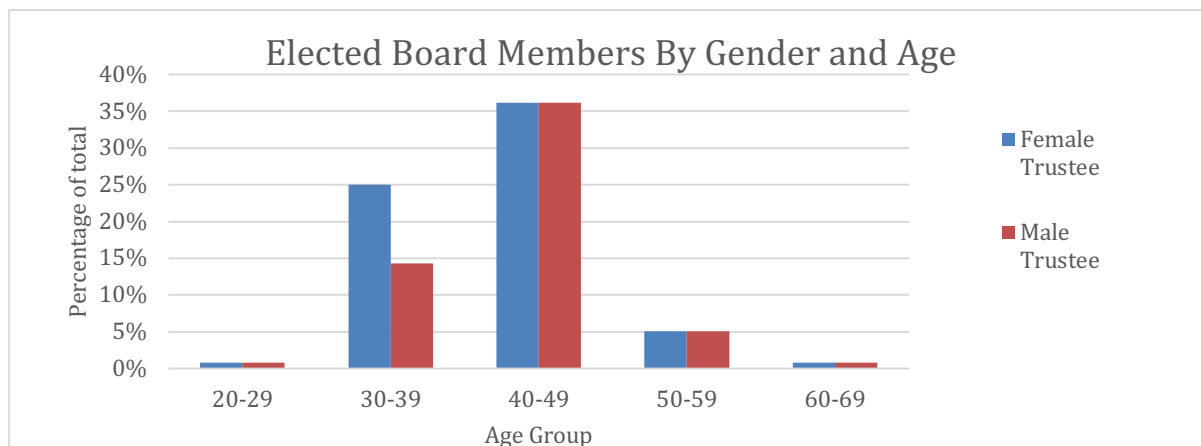


Figure 4 Elected members by Gender and Age



Ethnicity

Figure 5 shows that ethnicity of respondents is strikingly European and not at all representative of the South Island population. 3% of respondents identify as Māori compared to a South Island total of 14% (StatsNZ, 2013). The government’s Constitution Report (2013) compares representation at national and local government levels and identifies deficits in particular communities despite legislative mechanisms in place to ensure that Tangata Whenua representation is maintained. This has not been identified in the literature as an issue in BoT.



Figure 5 Respondents by Ethnicity

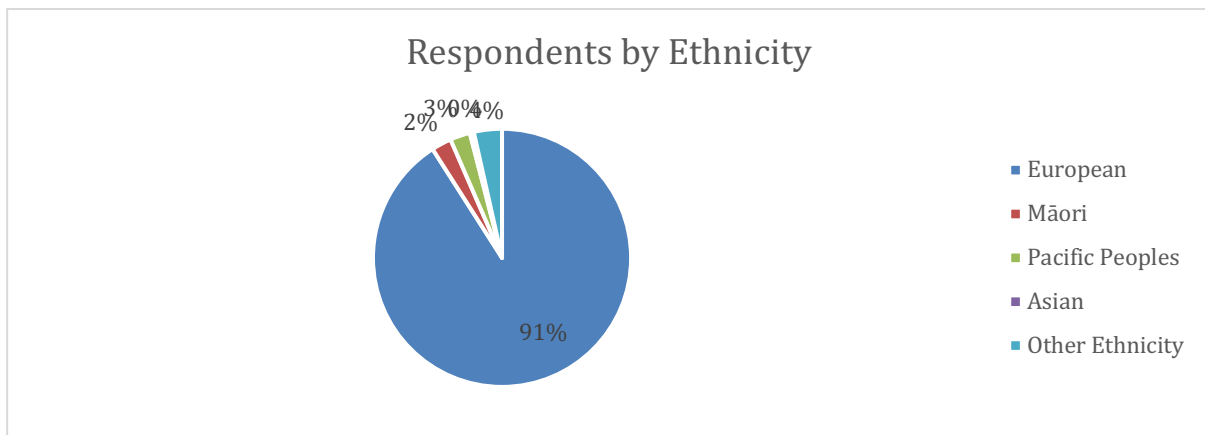


Figure 6 shows the spread of trustee ethnicities across each decile. Tangata Whenua are particularly underrepresented in lower deciles. This is surprising, as they continue to feature in statistics for unemployment and lower standards of living (Marriott 2014).

Figure 6 Ethnicity by Decile

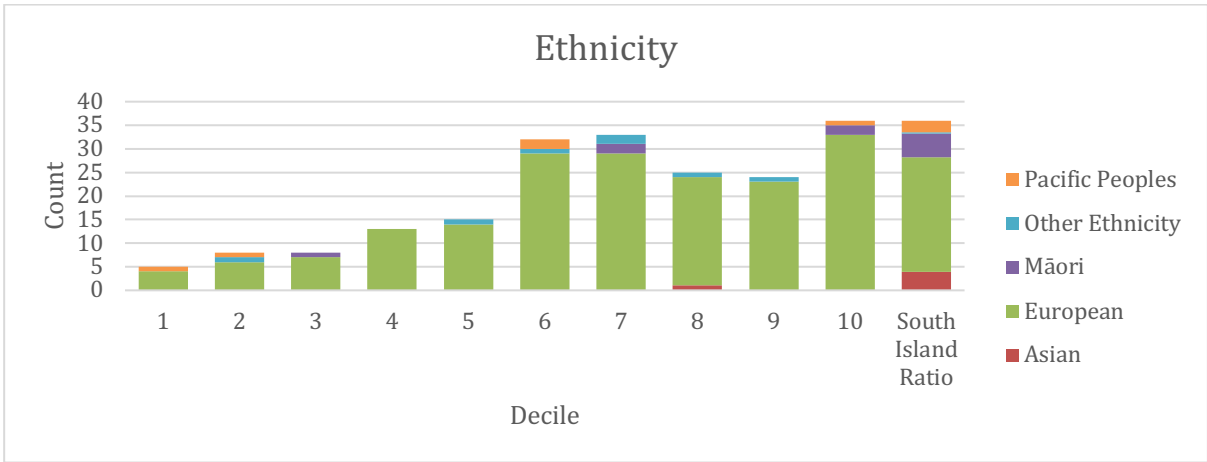


Figure 7 Tangata Whenua Roles

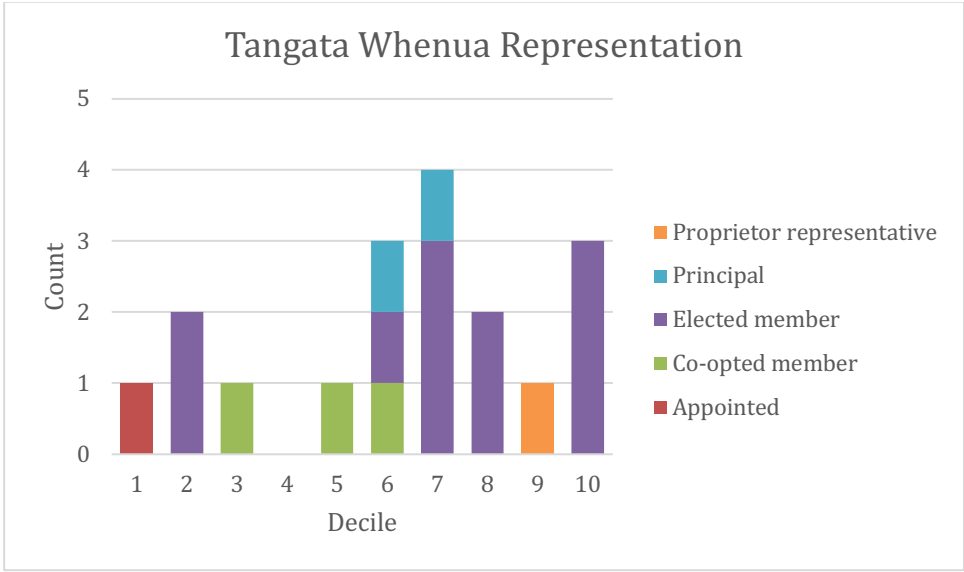


Figure 7 is a deeper examination on the roles of Tangata Whenua within each decile. It shows that out of the 18 Māori who responded, 11 were elected by the

community, 3 were co-opted, 2 are principals, there is 1 proprietor's representative, and 1 Ministry appointment. It is evident that the issue of under representation of Tangata Whenua in governance roles is the same as it is in many other areas (Constitution Advisory Panel 2013). Co-opting members is an effective method for improved representation.

Figure 7 also shows that co-opting and Ministry appointment is more common in the lower deciles, indicating a desire to improve representation in those BoT.

The lack of representation of minorities shows a fundamental flaw in the *laissez faire*/market driven structure of Tomorrow's Schools. The New Public Management reforms were driven by white males and white males have thrived in them. The small-scale democracy of a BoT election, particularly one in a low decile area where governance skills are scarce provides an opportunity for dominant community leaders to become more dominant.

Roles of BoT Members

The initial intention of the Picot Report was that BoT members were made up of parents, but 14 elected trustees reported that they have held the position for more than 10 years. This is a trend that has emerged: the president of the NZSTA has been a trustee since for 29 years (Kerr 2015). As the experience and service of incumbent candidates is highly valued, this creates inertia. This is demonstrated too in the case of long serving principals. One BoT respondent from a decile 10 school observed that inertia in their school can be attributed (at least in part) to:

The Principal predates tomorrow's schools and reminds us of that fact. He goes through the motions but does what he wants anyway and has little respect for the BoT. There is a significant issue with the power and control a principal holds from my experience in the primary sector (and an old boys network to keep it like that) with this school compared to another school I now have a child at which operates much more like I am used to in the tertiary sector, which is how I believe it should be.

Such influence can be partially offset. Having a well-qualified member of the community on the BoT may benefit the school with their business skills and entrepreneurial thinking. However there is the danger that such expertise may be contra to the needs of the community. The Constitutional Advisory Panel's recommendations are to use the same structures in local government as are used in national government – Maori seats and electorates (Constitution Advisory Panel 2013). It is this article's contention that representation on a micro level (BoT) is just as important as it is on the macro level (national government).

Figure 8 Membership Role of BoT Members

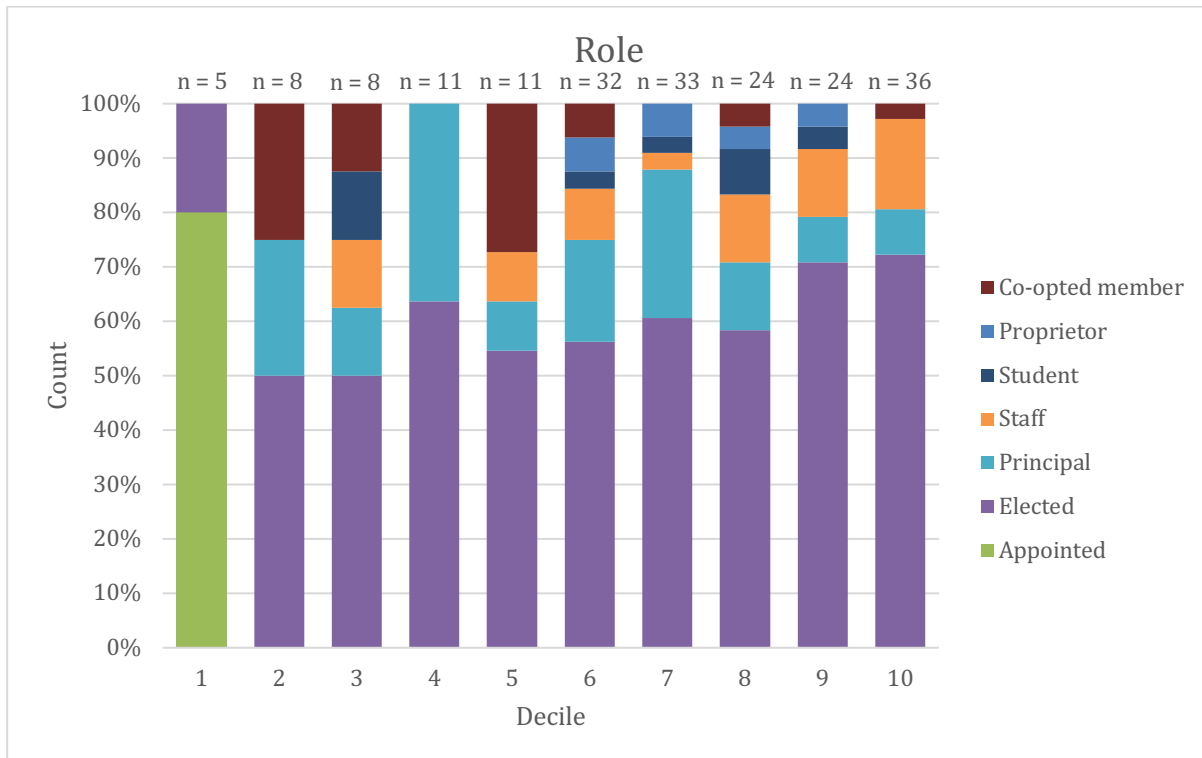


Figure 8 shows that the membership role of BoT members are well represented in each decile by the respondents. Decile 1 is dominated by Ministry appointed trustees and this is why it has been omitted from analysis. Co-opted members are more common in lower deciles. Co-opted members are usually evidence of a lack of specialist skills or ethnic representation.

Effective governance

Using Bevir's (2012) model of governance, we sought to explore the extent to which collaborative decision making was found within BoT. Specifically, the ease with which trustees feel able to make constructive contributions in the decision making process.



Three key questions were addressed:

1. Who sets the agenda in BoT meetings? The agenda directs and excludes what a BoT discusses and decides upon.
2. How comfortable are trustees to add agenda items? Collaborative decision making requires that trustees are comfortable to add agenda items.
3. How many questions are asked? This question is designed to estimate the level and depth of discussion.

Who sets the agenda?

The three figures below (.

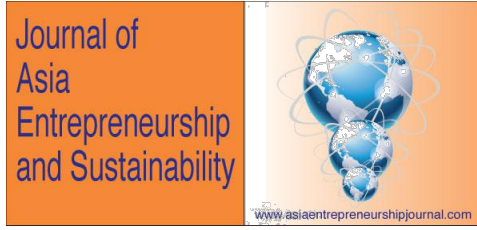


Figure 9,

Figure 10,

Figure 11) need to be carefully compared. Combined, they show that the chairperson has a greater influence in lower decile BoT. However, what they also show is that the higher the decile, the greater the degree of collaborative decision making. Good governance practice, incorporating collaborative decision making is more evident in higher deciles, confirming Bevir's assertion that "many forms of collaborative governance strongly favour the wealthy, the more educated, and those who belong to dominant racial and ethnic groups" (2012).



Figure 9 Who Sets The Agenda? Decile 2-5

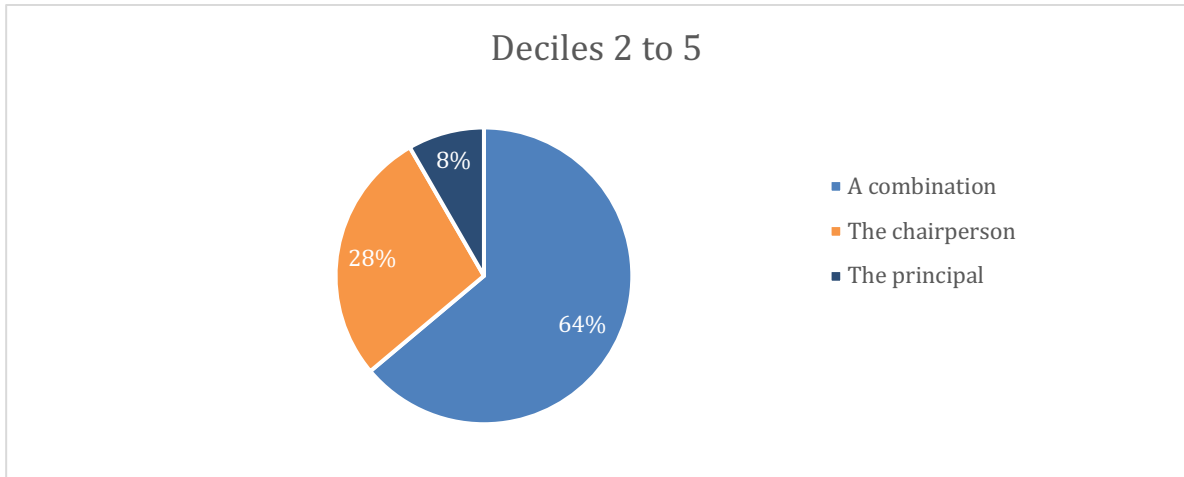


Figure 10 Who Sets The Agenda? Deciles 6-7

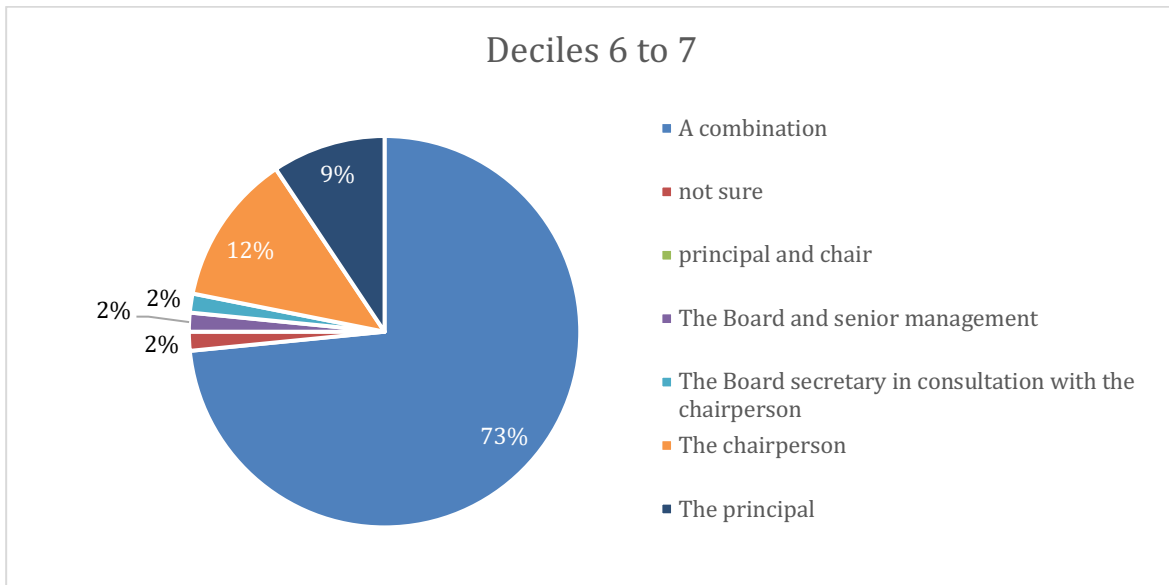
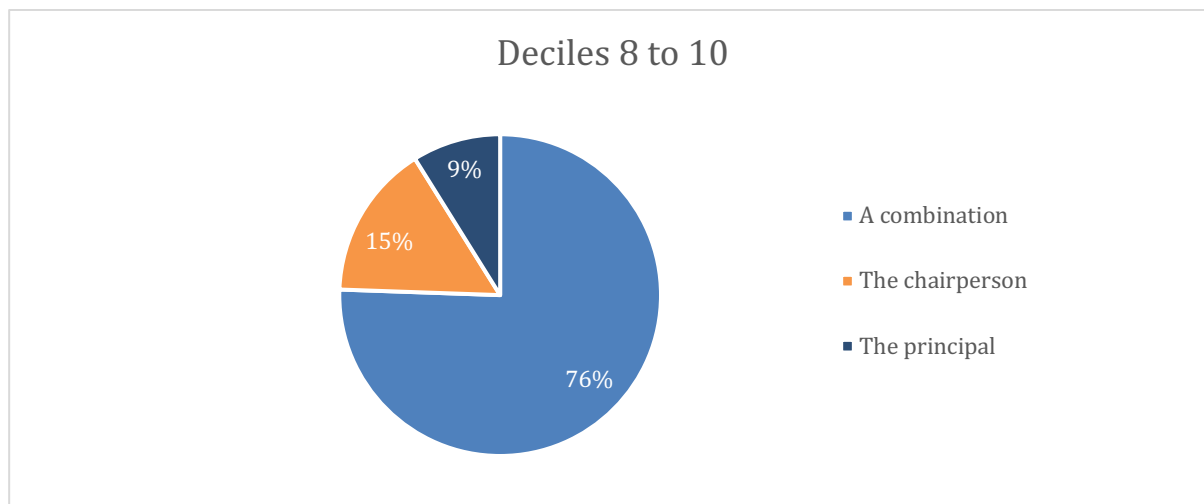


Figure 11 Who Sets The Agenda? Decile 8-10



This situation is demonstrated by a number of statements made by respondents concerning their ability to freely contribute to meeting agendas:

Our chair doesn't set an annual work plan, which would be valuable to the BoT. This would also allow the management to work on tasks during the year, rather than rushing (Decile 6).

These are screened by the chair and if not relevant to governance then removed (Decile 3).

Never have had the chance, though, as we are having to prioritise and we've not been taught that we could contribute (Decile 1).

Very closed minded BoT between principal and staff (Decile 4).

I would like to more than I currently am. The chair and principal are close and make most decisions (Decile 5).

Respondents describe a very close relationship between the principal and the chair. It seems that the chair has elevated status. The chair is elected by the BoT, but there is plenty of opportunity for meddling in this process. It is very concerning that agenda items are filtered through the chair before being added to the agenda. All members should be equally able to raise agenda items and ask questions.

How comfortable are trustees adding agenda items?

On this issue, respondents describe a very close relationship between the principal and the chair, with the latter enjoying a clearly distinguishable elevated status on the BoT. Although the chair is elected by the BoT, there was concern that agenda items are filtered through the chair before being added to the agenda. All members should technically have equal ability to raise agenda items and ask questions. These concerns were exhibited thus:

These [agenda items] are screened by the chair and if not relevant to governance then removed (Decile 3).

The above comment is particularly concerning. A more transparent approach would be to list the items that have been removed from the agenda in the minutes and note the reasons why they were regarded as “not relevant to governance.”

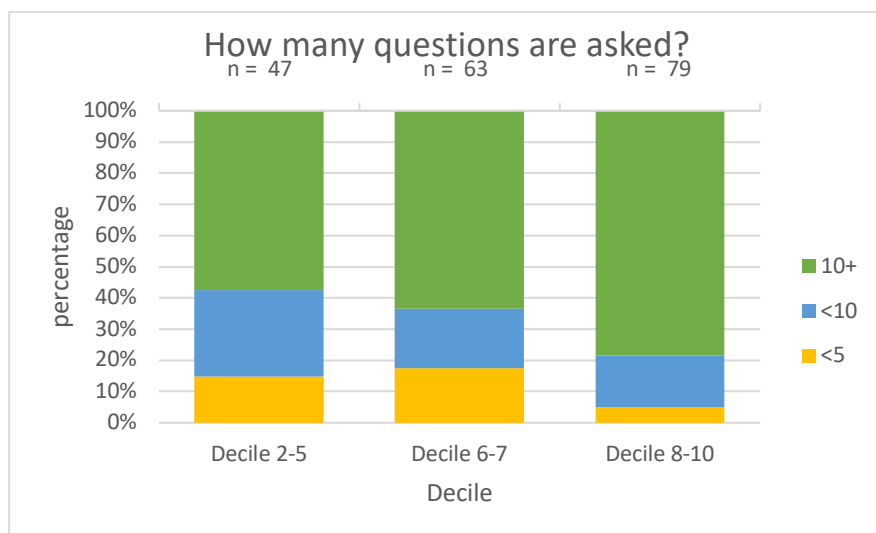
The scenario described asks too much of the chair in terms of accountability.

Yes-though I have tried to share knowledge and new directions with the chair to add to the agenda which haven't been added to meetings unfortunately (Decile 5).

How many questions are asked in each BoT meeting?

Figure 12 addresses the content and amount of discussion within each BoT meeting. It shows that fewer questions are asked in lower decile BoT. 43% of decile 2-5 trustees report fewer than 10 questions per meeting compared to 21% of decile 8-10 trustees. A more empowered BoT can be expected to ask more questions than a disempowered, intimidated BoT.

Figure 12 How Many Questions Are Asked?



One respondent remarked that that the chair often prematurely ends discussion on controversial topics. Further comments from this respondent indicate that a strong membership hierarchy is in place within this BoT. Indeed on this issue, the comments of a decile 7 principal are insightful:

Easy for any BoT member to contribute an agenda item. In practice, this doesn't happen very often.

This poses an issue around the level of engagement that trustees have with the BoT. Members need to feel free and unencumbered to contribute agenda items. If there are barriers to collaborative decision making in individual BoT, then a viable escalation process needs to be established for disenfranchised/disempowered BoT members. If it is the case that disenfranchised trustees are more widespread then the integrity of the system as a whole is called into question.

Figure 13 Trustees who do not feel comfortable contributing agenda items

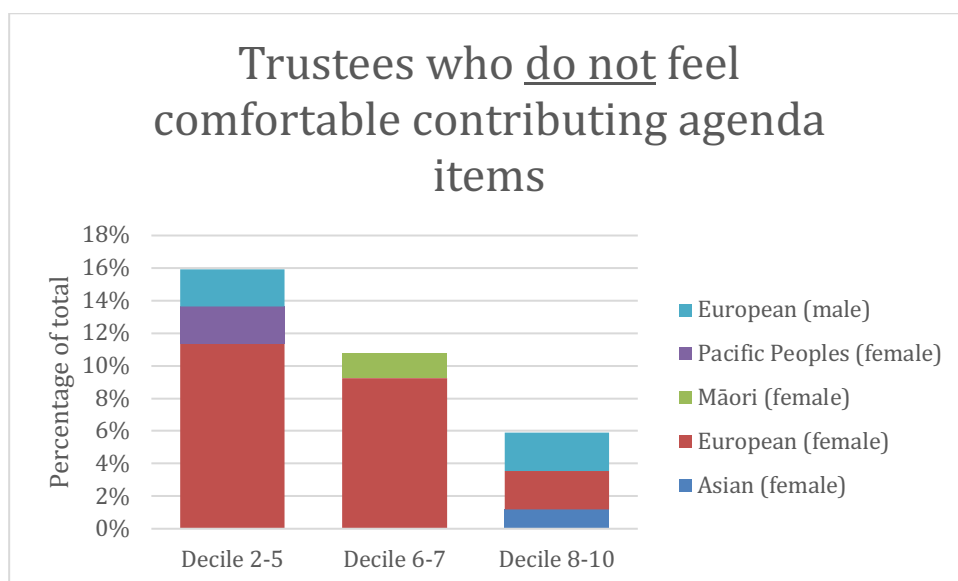
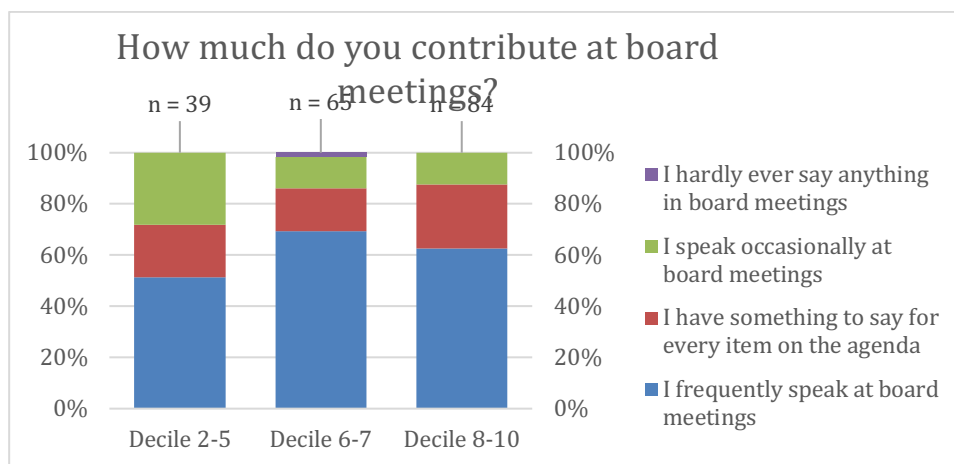


Figure 13 is a deeper examination of respondents that do not feel comfortable contributing agenda items. The ability and confidence to contribute agenda items is an essential part of good governance practice if defined as collaborative decision making. It shows that trustees in lower decile schools are less likely to

be comfortable contributing agenda items. Minorities are over-represented in this statistic, with women and non-Europeans dominating the group. Again, a type of membership hierarchy has emerged. This power dynamic is again evident in Figure 14 which illustrates that trustees in lower deciles contribute less to discussion.

Figure 14 How would you describe the amount of discussion you personally contribute?

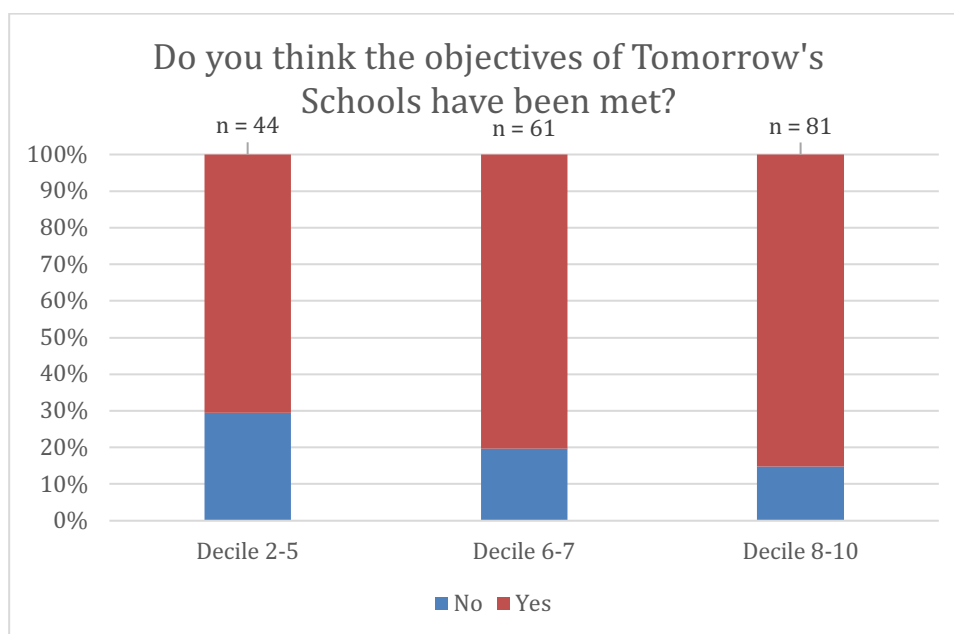


Have the objectives of Tomorrow’s Schools been met?

Trustees were asked if they felt that the objectives of Tomorrow’s Schools were met - specifically, were ‘communities making decisions about the future of children’. The results show that socially advantaged respondents are more likely to feel that the objectives to Tomorrow’s Schools have been met. This conclusion is important because it answers the question in the title of this paper: “Who’s in charge...” Our results indicate that in higher decile schools there was a tendency

towards supporting the notion that the objectives of Tomorrow's Schools had been met. In this context, Figure 15 would seem to support Bevir's argument that "governance structures favour the wealthy..."(Bevir 2012).

Figure 15 Do you think the objectives of Tomorrow's Schools have been met?



The direct question about Tomorrow's Schools prompted additional responses. The most insightful comment which underpinned Bevir's (2012) argument came from a decile 4 school principal:

*Schools are politically driven. We are at the mercy of political and often economic decisions rather than proven pedagogy. BoT trustees have no idea what they're getting into as volunteers and many cannot/do not give the time that is needed. Some decision making is totally out of their field of knowledge and it requires time and effort to research. No school has autonomy. **Schools like us***

who have a rich resource of professional people both on the BoT and as active change makers in the School community, are advantaged. (emphasis added)

Discussion – Analysis of Findings

For the advocates of Tomorrow's Schools the results of the research make sombre reading. Whilst there appears to be some resonance with the principals outlined in the Picot Report in some schools, the widespread shift in power relationships Picot aspired to usher in has clearly not come about.

Representation and good governance practice is evident in higher decile school BoT. However, lower decile school BoT and BoT of small schools do not show signs of good representation or good governance practice. Further, the data shows that there are age, gender, and ethnicity differences between high and low decile schools. Higher decile school trustees tend to be whiter, more male, more qualified, and more ethnically representative. Decision making in these BoT is more collaborative and less dominated by the chair. Trustees are more comfortable adding agenda items and contributing to discussion. They are more likely to believe that the objectives of Tomorrow's Schools have been met. Lower decile school trustees are 3 times more likely to be female than trustees in higher decile schools. While co-option is a tool at lower decile BoT disposal, Tangata Whenua representation remains very low. Lower decile BoT are more likely to be dominated by the chair. Trustees ask fewer questions and contribute less. Lower decile school trustees are twice as likely to believe that the objectives of Tomorrow's Schools have not been met as those in higher decile schools.

Gender

Volunteer work is often left to women (Ministry for Women 2016). Anecdotal evidence suggests that men with lower socioeconomic status may work hours that make BoT involvement difficult. BoT involvement in high decile schools may be regarded as a high status position and may attract well-qualified men who want to be visible within their community. The BoT capacity dimension is in effect here: successful schools have high capacity BoT. Members in high decile BoT are likely to have strong networks, business/management experience, and professional skills.

Ethnicity

Tangata Whenua representation is built into the legal structures at a national level. It is an area of concern at a regional level (Constitution Advisory Panel 2013) and this research shows that the same problem exists at a community level.

Age as a factor in governance

Given the nature of families, the ages of parents, and the career trajectories of principals, the age gap between principals and parent trustees is to be expected. The age gap between the principal and the elected trustees raises some questions about the power balance within a BoT. An average-aged female principal is 22 years older than an average-aged female trustee. It's surprising that this has not been investigated by researchers or addressed by the BoT training material.

Small schools and small communities

The average size of a school in New Zealand is 180 students. A high decile school will also have a larger population of parents to select trustees from as the families are likely to have fewer children and there is elevated status granted to an individual who gains membership on such a BoT. A low decile school is likely to have a lower number of parents as the families are likely to have more children. Small schools experience this effect to an extreme degree. There are 109 schools in the South Island with 50 students or fewer. BoT are not suitable for small schools in small communities. This is the biggest flaw in the model. A BoT of directors is appropriate for a medium size business, but not a sole trader.

A membership hierarchy

The definition of good governance that has been used in this paper is collaborative decision making. A BoT with good governance is one where all members are confident to add agenda items, ask questions, and have equal voice. There is evidence that a membership hierarchy is in place in many BoT in this research. To borrow from Orwell, there is a structure where some BoT members are “more equal than others....” .

The process of BoT election requires candidates to be nominated (they can nominate themselves) and voted on to the BoT by the parent community. There is only an election if more there are more than 5 candidates. Once elected, it is common for BoT to co-opt members if the elected trustees lack certain skills (often accounting/legal) or the BoT is not ethnically representative.

Tomorrow's Schools set the principal up as a gatekeeper to knowledge. They have the ability to filter most of the reports that might appear before the BoT. It is up to the conscience (or skill) of the principal to keep the BoT informed. This is the same as in the corporate world, where a CEO can hide information from the BoT of directors.

The chair also acts as a filtering agent. Legally, they have more power than the principal. The BoT can dismiss the principal, but the principal cannot likewise dismiss the BoT so easily. The data on agenda setting suggests that in a lower decile school, the chair has more influence than in a higher decile school. This supports the model of the membership hierarchy.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research has been to investigate whether there is a link between decile and effective governance within BoT of trustees in New Zealand. The findings show that such a link does exist and that the more privileged communities are well suited to the competitive New Public Management structures of Tomorrow's Schools. Based upon our findings we would advocate for a fundamental shift away from the Picot model towards one which is driven by equality and equity, rather than the competitive philosophy underpinning the 1989 reforms.

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