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Emerging schooling landscapes in England: how primary system leaders are responding to new school groupings.

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Abstract

In England the balance of responsibilities between national and local government for the governance of education is changing. Relationships between schools are shifting and new structures, groups and alliances are being created in response to national policy. The paper is part of a project to understand how the new local education landscapes are emerging. Primary schools are relatively reluctant to embrace key aspects of national policy. We analysed interviews with primary system leaders in three contrasting Local Authorities to find how they were responding, and why, and the nature of the groups they wanted to join, create or cooperate with. We identify concerns, interests and motivations that conflict with key aspects of national policy. In the process we supplement earlier contributions as to how school groupings might usefully be categorised.

Key Words

School groupings; primary headteachers; school reform; system leadership; self-improving system

Introduction

This paper is the latest report of a project to study how three local school landscapes in England have changed between 2013 and 2017 in response to a radical system wide policy. Many countries are seeking to make schools more autonomous. Charter schools in the USA, independent schools in New Zealand and Australia, *friskolor* in Sweden are examples. The mode of implementation and the significance, practical effects and political implications differ in diverse national contexts. In England the current policy is to make all schools into academies that are independent of Local Authorities (LAs) and directly funded by government.

Academisation changes the historic balance of responsibilities between national and local government for the governance of education. Since 1944 LAs were given responsibility for ensuring a sufficient quantity and quality of school places for children between five and the school leaving age. Since 1988 there has been significantly more intervention by central government and incremental change – in an increasingly marketised system schools have been given greater control over their budgets, internal organisation and appointment of staff while being more constrained by nationally prescribed curricula, high stakes testing and rigorous inspection.

In 2000 the Labour government introduced a small number of generously funded academies (by May 2010 they comprised 6%) to replace secondary schools (11yrs to 16yrs) deemed to be underperforming and serving disadvantaged communities. They were directly funded by

central government and the LA had no formal control over them. The great majority of schools remained either the responsibility of the LA or were run by religious organisations but funded by the government. Crucially, the funding for these schools went to the LA and, after top-slicing to pay for LA services to schools, was reallocated according to a locally agreed formula. But the money for an academy went untouched to the school.

The Conservative-led coalition government in 2010 and the 2015 Conservative government sought to convert every school, both primary (5yrs to 11yrs) and secondary, into an academy. The stated aim was to establish a 'school-led' system with four key features (Hargreaves, 2011; Chapman, 2015):

- the removal of the power of local government over education through academisation;
- a national framework of performance targets and inspection for all state funded schools (including academies);
- collaboration between schools to provide resources and impetus for school improvement;
- successful headteachers to be 'system leaders' exercising leadership beyond their own schools.

Such was the impact of the policy that by August 2017 there were over 6,500 academies (DfE, 2017a). As a result, in local arenas power is shifting and new structures, groups and alliances are emerging.

But national policy does not transfer intact to, or uniformly across, local areas and outcomes can differ from those intended (McLaughlin, 1987; McDonnell and Weatherford, 2016). Some key features of the actual effects of the policy are becoming evident. Firstly, the policies have dismantled the existing LA-based 'middle tier'[i] which is *'that space in the system where the governance and administration of education are enacted locally, take account of local circumstances and need, and recognise that decisions in relation to one school have consequences for others'* (Woods and Simkins 2014, 325).

Secondly, there are radical changes in the way schools and other stakeholders are relating to each other. These changed relations are often created by explicit agreements that bind some schools together in groups with varying internal structures and external obligations. The current government's preferred model is to group schools into formally constituted multi-academy trusts (MATs), often led by a high performing school and of a size (at least 10 and preferably more) to create sufficient capacity to provide services, support and challenge. Some MATs are large and operate nationally as branded chains, some are regional, and some are small and based on organic groupings of local schools. A new role of Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) was created in 2014, appointed in each of eight regions to oversee academies. They are facilitating the creation of MATs in their region. Such an approach allows considerable local variation and it is unclear how it will work out in relation to the functions of a middle tier. In addition to MATs different kinds of formal and informal

structures and alliances are emerging that facilitate collaboration but are not necessarily compatible with the government's preferred model.

Thirdly, secondary schools and primary schools are responding differently. In August 2017 the majority (70%) of secondary schools were academies but only a minority (25%) of primaries. The remaining 75% of primary schools (some 12,600 schools) are still maintained by their LA (DfE, 2017a). Primary schools are positioned in the school field differently from secondary schools and consequently their institutional and vocational habitus differs and they have distinctive educational and institutional practices (Coldron et al, 2015; Braun, 2012). These differences make academisation, and the kind of autonomy it offers, less congenial or attractive to many primary schools, and leads them to have a much stronger identification with, and commitment to, their LA than is typically the case with secondary schools. This presents a challenge for the Government's vision of a fully academised school-led system.

Fourthly, the vision of a school led system is being operationalised as one in which well-positioned headteachers exercise considerable influence in shaping local education arenas (Coldron et al, 2014).

The study

Our project seeks to understand what new orders are emerging at the local level and the factors shaping them. To do this we have, over the last four years, sought information and perspectives on local developments across both primary and secondary phases in three LA areas chosen to provide a variety of geographical, historical and policy contexts: a large metropolitan authority (City), a large rural authority with a dispersed population (County) and a smaller unitary authority centred on a town (Town). The level of academisation in each area at the time of the investigation varied, but all were characterised by: faster academisation in the secondary than the primary sector; limited presence of large national multiple academy trust chains; increasing emergence of local school-centred groupings; and a significant proportion of academies remaining free-standing.

The reluctance of primary schools to academise is an obstacle to system-wide academisation. Why this might be the case is therefore of interest to both critics and advocates of the policy. Despite this, much that has been written about emerging landscapes has focused on the secondary sector. As part of this project we have explored the different positioning, power and interests of primary and secondary schools in the school field (Coldron et al, 2015). In this latest phase we sought to deepen our understanding by interviewing primary school leaders to identify in their reported actions, reasoning and concerns what was determining their responses. In this way we hoped to be able to indicate the ingredients of an explanation of the general phenomenon of primary reluctance and a better understanding of the way in which primary system leaders wish to make sense of the national policy as they craft a workable local system.

We interviewed ten primary headteachers between May 2015 and July 2016 selected to have an area-wide perspective being engaged in processes relevant to local restructuring such as

collaborations, federations, or the creation of academies or teaching schools. All were keenly aware of the local and national policy environment. They had all been involved in the development of local peer review procedures. In City and County, all but one had a formal role in the LA-wide collaborative arrangements that were being developed locally. One in Town was active on a Strategic Partnership Board.

Our participants and their schools were well-positioned in relation to others locally and nationally. By well-positioned we mean their schools were graded as good or outstanding by the national inspectorate OfSTED; six of the heads were national or local leaders of education (NLEs or LLEs), a prestigious designation which meant they were officially deemed successful practitioners and therefore qualified to support other schools; and four were leaders of MATs. Key characteristics of interviewees at the time of interview are shown in Table 1. Interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms.

Insert Table 1 about here

Under national policy the power to craft emerging local landscapes has largely shifted to such well-positioned headteachers who possess high levels of social, cultural and symbolic capital in the local school field (Coldron et al, 2014). Therefore, how they are responding to the national policy context, including any concerns they have towards it, helps us to understand the nature of the emerging new order. We have no evidence of the responses and perceptions of those less well-positioned and effectively disempowered. This is an important area for future research.

To facilitate a conversational approach (Patton, 1987: 116) the interviews used a semi-structured schedule based on versions from earlier phases of the research and developed in the light of themes identified in the evolving analytical framework of the project. The interview focused on what kinds of groups these system leaders were aware of in their locality, and which they wanted their schools to belong to and why. Interviews lasted about an hour and, with participant permission, were audio-recorded and transcribed. We collected additional sources of information such as reports and other relevant documents from each of the interviewees about their schools and other relevant organisations.

The interview transcripts were analysed in relation to cross cutting themes identified in the framework developed through the construction of a narrative thematic account of the thirty five interviews of the previous phases of the project and new themes emerging in this data-set.

School groupings and the middle tier

If it is accepted that a large school system such as England's needs some kind of local mechanism, a middle tier, to coordinate and steer the activities of individual schools to enable the system to be effective and genuinely 'self-improving' then, with the removal of the responsibility for strategic decision making from LAs, there is a problem as to how these functions are to be fulfilled. The solution incentivised by the government is the establishment

of groups of schools working together to create capacity to improve. In addition area-wide decision making bodies independent of, but often initiated by, the LA are being created.

School groups therefore constitute in part the new order replacing the 'middle tier' previously provided by local government. A key focus of the interviews was what groups our participants were joining or creating. The nature of the new groups varies considerably. If we are to understand the trajectory of system change we need to find a suitable way of describing the significant characteristics of the groups being created. In this section we consider how best to categorise groupings according to their nature and how they relate to middle tier functions. In what follows we focus particularly on the main school groups and leave to another paper how the classifications can be applied to other kinds of groups such as area-wide Learning Companies or Partnerships.

Classifying school groups and relating classifications to real world cases is challenging because of the enormous range of variables on which groupings can be classified. Some discussions (Woods and Simkins, 2014; Chapman, 2015) draw on policy-induced categories - for example, multi-academy trusts, umbrella academy trusts, federations, foundation trusts and teaching school alliances. These capture policy-determined features such as legal status and explicit contractual responsibilities, but miss non-formalised aspects of relationships.

Courtney (2015) argues for viewing schools through two further lenses: the locus of legitimation (corporate, religious, institutional or public) and branding whereby characteristics are claimed or attributed that affect the school's or group's distinctive position relative to others. Chapman and his colleagues (Salokangas and Chapman, 2014) draw on Douglas's (1970, 1982) concepts of *group* - the degree to which there is perceived shared group membership, and *grid* - the degree to which there is strong central control, to draw attention to the ways in which forms of power (horizontal and vertical) are structured into the relations between partnered schools.

We suggest that these proposals can be incorporated and developed (Simkins 2015, 7) to capture the unique attributes of particular groups by locating their position on continua related to four sets of parameters concerning the history of group formation, group organisation, group structure and intergroup relations as shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

In the following sections we consider the features of MATs and TSAs, whose structures are largely determined by central government policy, and Federations which are organically generated.

Multiple Academy Trusts (MATs)

MATs are seen by the current government as the best means through which *'proven educational models can spread and grow and the best leaders can extend their influence by running multiple schools'* (DfE, 2016, para.1.46). In terms of scope and scale, members of a MAT do not need to be limited to a particular LA and can have any number of member schools although government's preference is for ten or more.

MATs can be organised internally in various ways but the government prefers that which provides clear focussed governance, concentrated expertise, economies of scale and a standardised model of how each school should operate. This implies having a single governing body and an Executive Headteacher/Principal or Chief Executive Officer (CEO). In Courtney's terms such a MAT has corporate legitimation and is strongly branded by its pedagogical approach. For Chapman and colleagues it has high *grid* characteristics with the *group* implications less clear. Such organisations are largely placed to the right of the group organisation continua in Table 2.

In August 2017 there were 949 trusts comprising more than one school and containing in total 4,744 academies. Of these, 709 had 2-5 academies, 168 had 6-10 academies, 47 had 11-20 academies and 25 had more than 20 academies. Almost two-thirds of academies were in trusts comprising a single school (DfE, 2017a). We have found no overall data on internal structure, phase composition, formation, or organisation. We therefore know little about how far they embody strong *grid* or *group* characteristics, or the nature of their legitimation and branding. However, we do know that most of the MATs to date are required to raise the performance of underperforming schools through sponsorship, so their membership is heterogeneous.

Teaching School Alliances (TSAs)

TSAs have been given a key role for the maintenance of the quality of education. They are led by 'outstanding' schools tasked with working with a group of other schools to coordinate high quality school-based initial teacher training; provide school-to-school support and evidence-based professional development; and act as a 'brokerage hub' for a local self-improving school system. Collaborating schools can be members of more than one alliance. TSAs are potentially in competition for 'business' with other TSAs and school improvement organisations operating in their area. Compared with the typically tighter structure of MATs, they vary widely in form, often have fluid membership and are typically engaged on an 'evolutionary and dynamic journey' (Gu et al, 2015 cp. 179). They appear to be most successful where member schools share values, especially where they are built on existing partnerships.

TSAs are less easy to characterise than MATs. In Courtney's terms their legitimation may vary, although since they are generally loosely structured they are more likely to be publically legitimated through their focus on collaborative school improvement. The nature of their branding, too, can vary both in nature and strength. For example, a strong teaching school can effectively impose a brand through the ways in which it chooses to build its TSA, although many do not choose to do so. The evaluation by Gu et al (2015) emphasises the importance of strong *group* rather than *grid* characteristics for school effectiveness. In terms of Table 2, TSAs are likely to be at the left of both group formation and group organisation continua, being voluntary and decentralised, although they may have significant commercial relations within and beyond the alliance. In June 2017, there were 820 teaching schools and 649 teaching school alliances (DfE, 2017b).

Federations

Federations are typically small groups of schools that have voluntarily established more or less formal relationships, for mutual support and to share practices and resources. They may also agree procedures for peer review and mutual challenge. In some federations schools have created forms of trust short of academisation through, for example, the establishment of a joint governing body. In Courtney's terms their legitimation typically remains public, and branding at a group level is weak or non-existent. For example 800 schools have formed co-operative trusts, which suggests a popular but often weak form of branding (Coates 2015). In Chapman's terms they are high on *group* but typically low on *grid* characteristics and in terms of Table 2 they have been built voluntarily from below, and while they may have a centralised governance structure this, typically, does not have the power it has in a MAT. Federations can transform into MATs, especially if poor performance among some members requires them to be sponsored. However, many have not chosen to do so.

MATs, TSAs and federations then are very different forms of school grouping, sharing certain broad attributes, but varying considerably beyond these. The ways in which they might co-exist in particular local landscapes is an important empirical question with significant policy implications. The government's determination is to press for all schools to belong to a MAT and to work with TSAs. This means that schools (whether maintained by the LA or not) that have not engaged in any formal collaborative arrangements with other schools, are faced with important strategic choices about which school groups to engage with and on what terms. This is particularly pressing for primary schools because the low level of academisation makes them a target for forced membership of a MAT.

We turn now to the key themes that emerged from what our participants told us about how primary headteachers, as system leaders, are responding to the challenges they face and, more specifically, their objectives and intentions in relation to the grouping of their schools with others and their perspectives on academisation.

Times are dangerous

None of the heads whose schools were not already academies expressed any strong motivation to convert or to belong to a MAT but were aware of the danger a dip in results would bring. Philip(City) expressed this sense of nervously navigating turbulent waters that was a strong theme in the interviews.

> 'I think school leaders are all feeling a bit vulnerable to a poor Ofsted and then becoming a forced academy...' (Philip(City))

All of our respondents thought it was dangerous for a school not to join with others in some kind of grouping. Three reasons for this often repeated assertion were prominent: firstly, a judgement that the direction of national policy was unlikely to change significantly and that, like it or not, they had to accommodate; secondly, an endorsement of improving professional practice through collaboration with other schools; and thirdly, mitigating expected difficulties

of finance and staffing through savings of scale. Their experience, together with their analysis of the national policy trajectory, led them to fear for the future of those primary schools which remained, in their terms, 'isolated' or 'orphans', especially small ones which have less spare capacity to engage with area wide developments. As Michael(County) put it:

> 'If you decide that you are confused by everything so you... put your head in the sand and hope that it all goes away... that's a dangerous place to be.'

They saw isolation as an issue not just for schools whose performance was weak, but also for schools whose current high performance led to overconfidence in their ability to go it alone, and those that were very small or remote.

But even when you belonged to a MAT you were not necessarily safe. Nuala(City) was considering expanding partly because she recognised that as a small MAT they were still vulnerable to being taken over by a larger MAT offering benefits of scale, especially if there was a dip in their results.

> 'We could be a very attractive proposition…[and] oh my goodness me, if something went wrong with [our weaker schools'] results, we could be in a very different place and then we're vulnerable.'

Evolutionary development of a workable system

A key theme often reflected on by our interviewees was a strong preference to grow their groups in an evolutionary way from local foundations. As experienced managers they were aware of the difficulties of maintaining schools and sustaining effective relations between diverse partners, especially during a period of expansion, change and restricted resources. They also expressed a strong moral commitment to the community role of primary schools. There were three distinct themes in their reflections about these things.

Keeping MATs local

With the significant exception of Colin(County), whose approach we discuss later, our participants were opting to develop collaborative relations with nearby schools. They believed that their own school should support isolated or struggling schools and they were all doing so. They were committed to the communities in which they were located and saw the value of placing school-to-school support within a broader engagement with wider collaborative arrangements orchestrated at LA or sub-LA level. As Nuala(City) put it when talking about the pressure from the Regional School Commissioner to expand her MAT:

> 'We know [City]…I think local... is really, really important. I think that's also been a strength of our MAT.'

We have already noted one reason for this commitment to local engagement, namely that primary schools, given their positioning in the local school field, are disposed to embrace a positive role for the LA. It was one of the ways they manifested a professional concern for all the children in the area, a moral purpose wider then that associated with their own institution.

In addition, our participants were aware of the practical difficulties of maintaining collaboration across LA boundaries, and/or at great distance. Indeed, two had attempted this with unsatisfactory results. Working with local schools, often as a result of already established social and professional connections and with insider knowledge, came more naturally and was more likely to work than the more risky option of making distant and/or relatively unknown connections.

Keeping MATs small

Manageability was a key reason for our headteachers preferring groups much smaller than those envisaged by government policy. The government wants MATs to contain at least 10 to 15 schools but the four MATs of our participants were much smaller with two or three schools. How these MATs came to be formed explains why they are small. Nuala(City) had some years ago been asked by the LA to help two weaker schools nearby that serve the same community as hers. She later formed a MAT with them. She explained, *'it was really clear at that stage that all three wanted to go together, because it was about that partnership and for the community it was really important'.* Gerard(County) had been asked by the governors of a nearby school to be executive head because they were without a permanent headteacher and had tried unsuccessfully to appoint. Judith(Town) had joined with another successful school with whom they wanted to cement a strong, existing partnership. And even Colin(County), who otherwise thought big, had kept his MAT to single figures. In a similar way Philip(City) was considering offering to form a MAT to work with local schools that needed supporting and to prevent them *'being taken over by a chain'*. But the Regional School Commissioners are putting pressure on these successful headteachers to increase the size of their MATs. Nuala(City) and Colin(County) were both in discussion with their Regional Commissioners about developing a growth plan and the others envisaged similar pressures.

'You've got to choose your MAT and your friends carefully'.

The nature of the other schools with which they would be investing their future was a key consideration. In determining how collaborative relationships work out in practice shared values were important, including how far individual personalities gelled. With the exception of Colin(County), geography, and community were also important . Each of these variables can be interpreted and related to each other in different ways, but, whatever the principles of engagement, Nuala(City) put the general view succinctly: *'You've got to choose your MAT and your friends carefully'*. There was an awareness of the danger of creating a too cosy group with a reluctance to challenge each other. In a comment that reflected a professional concern to ensure challenge to enhance good practice that was characteristic of all our participants, Nuala noted that:

> 'It's not about a bunch of mates just saying, "Let's put our schools together and we'll have a MAT and we'll all be friends together". It's got to have a lot more teeth and bite and accountability.'

In general they expressed the view that collaborative relationships, and groups to which they might belong, should be built from below in a measured and organic way. Such an

evolutionary approach enabled values and relationships to be tested and provided the best basis for sustaining effective professional relationships.

A further key concern of those who led a MAT was how many schools in need of support should be admitted as members. They worried about having the capacity to support failing schools and still maintain the performance of successful members. This led them to want to constitute their MATs selectively. Nuala(City) for example was developing a 'five-year growth plan' aiming explicitly for a ratio of three good or outstanding schools to one that requires support. And Gerard(County) put the same point forcefully.

> 'We've got a very kind of narrow view on the schools that we would be able to incorporate in the trust. There are certain things that we felt we could support on and there are a whole lot of other things where we think, "Do you know what? We couldn't support a school in that situation". We're very careful not to just say "Yes, yes, yes" to anybody who might want to come in. So I think it will expand over a period of time, maybe three to five schools eventually, but no bigger than that I wouldn't have thought.' (Gerard(County))

This raises the question as to how far the continued high stakes testing and accountability system stands in the way of MATs being a key provider of school improvement to failing schools.

Protecting identity

By the time our participants became headteachers they had necessarily developed a successful educational practice rooted in years of experience - a professional signature in which they were personally and professionally invested. It is this that these interviewees alluded to and which they feared might be lost:

> '...we want to keep that unique nature and we want to keep all the things that we're doing and we don't want to be forced into an academy chain that's going to say "No, you can't do that"...' (Vera(County))

> 'I think it is really about schools knowing themselves well enough to know...which elements they're willing to have a shared vision for, and which bits they hold dear to themselves. Because you don't want clones; you want schools to retain their individuality.' (Carol(Town)).

The wish to preserve their highly developed practice, whilst still being strongly accountable (as all our interviewees said they wanted to be), was they felt a condition of their optimal functioning as professionals.

There was also a concern to protect a primary school identity. This was expressed in relation to MATs and TSAs that might be dominated by a secondary school.

> '...we don't want to become an academy and sacrifice our identity to do it… I think that's what makes a lot of primaries reluctant about the cross-phase... It's the loss of

identity, loss of autonomy and not having a voice, because if you're a small primary working alongside a large secondary, how do you ensure that as a primary you've got equal say and sway in terms of the direction of what happens?' (Gerard(County))

'...if there is a mismatch between MATs that are very secondary-led and primary...where those people at the top of the MATs haven't got an understanding of the primary philosophy and ethos...that's where it doesn't work...Some of them think that the secondary way is the way things need to happen and, for example, can't understand behaviour of four year olds that come into school not toilet trained and…biting and kicking.' (Judith(Town))

Relationships with Teaching School Alliances

The effectiveness of TSAs was a common theme in the interviews. Only one of our respondents (Colin(County)) led a TSA. Carol(Town) was concerned that the large, local primary TSA would overwhelm her school because of its size so, despite wariness about being dominated, she chose to work with the local secondary TSA into which most of her pupils transferred. Our other respondents were actively engaged with local TSAs to some degree, but concern was often expressed about their limited geographical coverage in their local authorities, especially in relation to the primary sector. Nuala(City), compensating for the fact that there was only one primary-led TSA locally, was a strategic partner with a number of TSAs outside the authority; while Jack(City) was shortly to move to a school in another part of the LA where he hoped to establish a primary teaching school for the area.

Both Vera(County) and Gerard(County) were engaged with a TSA centred on the county town. This TSA had grown out of longstanding collaborative activity between ten primary schools. Vera(County) had been one of these partners. Gerard(County), in contrast, was attracted to join because the TSA was establishing a local hub with which it would be easier to engage. Such developments, however, created other dilemmas:

'One of the things I struggle with is that as a teaching school you have a duty to grow and pull people in. That's one of the KPIs [authors note: *key performance indicators*]. I worry about that, because of the watering down of relationships. It looks then a bit like empire-building and that's not ever what we set out to do.' (Vera(County))

Headteachers in our three local authorities faced different options depending on their perception of the number of TSAs available to them, their legitimacy to advise, and how congenial the TSA's approach to professional development was. They were concerned, for example, that, in the way that they were set up, TSAs are required to attract business in competition with other TSAs, and this presented challenges for the development of local collaboration. There was as a result a feeling that the commercial transaction mode of exchange of TSAs was in conflict with a more effective professional reciprocity and this led to some suspicion of some TSAs. Michael(County) illustrates this feeling well:

'Teaching schools are all trying to get a piece of the action and I think the danger from schools is that unless some coherent presentation of it occurs, schools are going

> to be lost into a kind of commercialised world, because of course a lot of it now is "You want to be part of that family, you pay a slice of money for it"…Certainly when I've spoken to colleague headteachers you have to manage your membership of these things with great care.' (Michael(County))

A different approach to groupings and growth

Colin(County), readers will have gathered by now, while sharing some preferences, represented an alternative way of responding to the changes, preferring different kinds of group characteristics. The crucial difference was that, with a previous background in business, he was confident in designing means to leverage funding for what he termed his 'moral purpose MAT'. He judged that a MAT, even of thirty schools, would be too small to generate sufficient funds for an adequate professional development programme.

He had therefore developed a business model where his TSA generates sales of light touch professional development services to a national and even international market thereby avoiding restriction to a small geographical area where there would likely be competition from other TSAs. His TSA at the time of interview employed nine core staff and had a turnover of £500k to £800k. This generated sufficient surplus funds to be ploughed back into the TSA and eventually to develop a MAT of likeminded schools. This strategy involves a number of kinds of membership. Schools can join the TSA's 'network' primarily as a purchaser of services, or they can join the smaller group of 'members' who have bought into the TSA philosophy. It is from the latter that Colin seeks to identify potential partners for MAT growth. Central to this strategy is Colin's strong 'moral purpose' brand. His unique selling point is a commitment to a pedagogic approach and associated classroom practice that affirms certain principles of education.

> 'We're trying to be the moral purpose trust…What we do is we've got a particular way of thinking around education, so we are very student-orientated, making learning relevant, ensuring that it's exciting and engaging and we want other schools to come and join us who feel the same way – not just a local cluster of schools, because we would be mixing in a mire of difference and that could be dangerous… We've got a set of principles that we say if you want to join the trust you've got to be thinking of these principles.'

He asserted that this approach was entirely compatible with schools retaining their individuality and maintaining strong links with their communities. Colin(County) is comfortable with a managed involvement of large numbers of schools not restricted to a relatively small area. The legitimacy of the MAT and the TSA comes from its pedagogic stance and not primarily from its badging as Outstanding by Ofsted or the representativeness of its governance structure. With regard to homogeneity he requires members to hold similar pedagogic views but, like our other interviewees, is happy to have a mix of struggling and high performing schools so long as the latter are in a majority. The group has a predominantly commercial relation with a peripheral set of schools but the relation between core members is on the basis of a shared professional approach.

Discussion and conclusion

For David Hargreaves, one of the earliest proponents of the self-improving school system, 'deep partnership' is its essence and is built on four foundations: joint practice development, high social capital, collective moral purpose and effective evaluation and challenge (Hargreaves, 2012). Such ideas are consistent with the aims expressed by our heads. But we can also hear in what they told us two broadly contrasting approaches to group formation in response to national policy. For the large majority, while recognising that school groupings would most likely have to evolve within an academised environment, the following principles guided their actions. They were strongly in favour of building from below from established relationships; of moving slowly to ensure that new relationships were embedded; and of keeping school groupings relatively small, local and manageable.

They acknowledged a professional responsibility to work in the interests of all the children in the area and not just those in the schools they led. This motivated active engagement in establishing area-wide arrangements instigated and brokered by the LA. It also meant accepting underperforming schools requiring support as members of their MAT but only in a proportion calculated not to jeopardise the performance of the other members. They saw cooperation and strategic decision making as facilitative and competition as counterproductive. In terms of internal group relations, for example between member schools in a MAT, they wanted to work together on the basis of negotiation and equity rather than through strong central control (a *group* rather than *grid* orientation) partly in order to protect different professional identities and maximise mutual respect. These preferences implied a strong orientation towards the legitimation of emerging, or desired, groupings in terms of public value. Concepts of corporate legitimation and branding were weak or non-existent.

We also found a contrasting approach which highlighted a commitment to explicit educational principles. It was more important to join together with people who shared those principles than on any other basis. There was a similar concern about capacity to sustain success but this was to be done by having a viable business plan that would generate surplus funds from a large peripheral market for TSA services to invest in staff development in a core MAT. Consequently localism was relegated in favour of a wider geographical reach and a clear pedagogical brand that member schools of the MAT would be expected to buy into.

In relation to the problem of the middle tier, the approach of slowly evolving collaborative school groups within wider local collaborative arrangements provides the beginnings of an institutional architecture to enable effective local joint decision making, practice development, evaluation and challenge which draws on social capital beyond the confines of the relatively small formal groupings. The alternative approach foregrounds the TSA supported by a MAT to provide similar functions within the grouping itself but not beyond it. While such groupings could theoretically be of great size, and therefore be able to fulfil middle tier functions for a large number of schools, they would not necessarily provide either a localised or comprehensive middle tier.

How does what our interviewees told us fit with the objective to fully academise the English school system and to establish MATs of a size that would have the capacity to provide middle

tier functions to their members? The main driver for the creation of MATs has been to enable strong schools to support weaker schools, typically through formal sponsorship. However, if MATs become dominant in the primary sector, and many remain small, it is likely that a significant proportion would comprise mainly, or entirely, successful schools coming together by choice to make relatively homogeneous groupings. In such circumstances MAT members are unlikely to be comfortable with the concept of a 'lead school' as the sponsor model requires because of concerns about their autonomy and identity. At the same time, for such a high performing group, the grounds for imposing strong and uniform modes of operation from a central authority would be weak there being no urgent problem of failing schools to address. There would also be deep concerns on the part of primary system leaders about the manageability and quality of internal relations in MATs of the size envisaged by government and, at least for a significant proportion, about the weakening of the connection with local communities and between neighbour schools.

If the views of the majority of heads in our study are widespread, they suggest that a possible outcome, especially where, as in City and County, local government and schools are working to broker new area-wide systems, would be that local systems stabilise as focused on a geographical area; with arrangements to ensure area-wide strategic decision making; where the effects of competition have been minimised; and where the responsibilities for the quality of the local system are effectively shared between local authorities and school leaders. That kind of settlement would be in tension with encouraging large MATs that are not locally grounded and would allow LAs to continue to play a strong role.

As such, the interests of local primary system leaders may represent a fundamental challenge to central government aims. A middle tier that emerges slowly, that is locally grounded and that values the spreading of responsibility across member schools rather than hierarchical structures with strong *grid* characteristics implies either a policy implementation trajectory that is slower than the Government hopes for, and does not provide the strong central levers that large centralised MATs would provide; or, alternatively, it requires the imposition of organisational solutions that are potentially inimical to what many primary system leaders see as the best interests of their schools, communities and the children they serve.

This analysis reveals key concerns, interests and motivations as our participants respond to the context of changing relationships and shifting power. In so far as that context is shared by other primary professionals we may expect that real choices will be determined by similar concerns, interests and motivations. In trying to better understand how a distinct primary outlook and positioning is being expressed in real choices we have gone some way to explaining the slower academisation in the primary sector. In the process we have contributed to developing a categorisation of school groupings to capture significant features.

Our findings raise questions about the policy dilemmas that are likely to emerge in any school system that seeks to address the challenges deriving from increasing school autonomy through the creation of new 'middle tier' structures. As suggested in our introduction, such structures, if they are to be meaningful, must take account of local circumstances and need, recognise that decisions in relation to one school have consequences for others, enhance

collaboration, and act as a buffer between the national centre and schools (Woods and Simkins, 2014; Ainscow, 2015). Establishing a middle tier of primary school groupings that meets system-level accountability demands and the preferences about organisational arrangements of the schools themselves will be no easy task. The findings also raise questions about the degree to which generalised structural arrangements can meet the very different cultural and organisational imperatives of primary and secondary schools. Future research in response to these questions might fruitfully look at the role played by the latent professional values of the primary community in influencing the ways in which the system develops. It is also important to analyse the role being played by local authorities and the determinants of any different approaches taken in different localities.

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[i] See Aston et al 2013; Lubienski 2014; Muir 2014; Woods and Simkins 2014; Simkins et al 2015; House of Commons 2014.