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# The growth of multi-academy trusts in England: emergent structures and the sponsorship of underperforming schools

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## ABSTRACT

In England, schools are able to take on academy status, which is intended by the central government to give them greater autonomy (DfE, 2018). Groups of academies can form multi-academy trusts (MATs), which typically grow in size with additional schools becoming academies and joining. One mechanism for MAT growth is sponsorship, which occurs when an underperforming school is required to become an academy and to join a MAT to facilitate its improvement. It was to explore the emerging patterns of MATs and their operation, especially in relation to sponsorship, that the research we report here was carried out. The research was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, we sought to establish the emerging patterns of MATs that sponsor underperforming schools. In the second phase, we interviewed MAT chief executive officers (CEOs) to further explore emerging patterns of MATs, the factors affecting the growth of MATs and the nature of sponsorship. Our analysis shows the development of a complex and potentially unsustainable state schooling system in England, managed by Regional School Commissioners (RSCs) and dependent on the altruistic values and motivations of CEOs of MATs to improve schools that are underperforming.

## KEYWORDS

academies, complexity theory, motivation, multi-academy trusts, sponsorship, stakeholders

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## INTRODUCTION

The education system in England is undergoing a radical reorganization, which started over 10 years ago. Central to this reorganization is schools being able to take on academy status, which is known as academization and was intended by central government to enhance their autonomy (DfE,2018). In a subsequent development, groups of academies were allowed to form multi-academy trusts (MATs), which are distinct legal entities (Legislation.gov.uk, 2018). MATs typically grow in size with additional schools becoming academies and joining. One mechanism for MAT growth is sponsorship, which occurs when an underperforming school is required by central government to become an academy and to join a MAT to facilitate its improvement. MATs have therefore been a significant development in the English education system and now have a central role in enabling the improvement of underperforming schools.

MAT growth in the early stages of the MAT policy implementation was emergent and MATs as organizational structures evolved. In this regard, MAT growth reflected the properties of complex human systems (Hawkins and James, 2018; Mittleton-Kelly and Davy, 2013) in the way it developed. The motivations of school principals, parents, teachers and governors, who are key players at school level, are significant in underpinning the process of a school deciding to become an academy, and in MAT growth, especially in relation to the sponsorship of underperforming schools. The nature of MATs and their growth has not been the subject of extensive research, especially in relation to the role of MATs in bringing about the improvement of underperforming schools. In particular, the characteristics of the academies that comprise a MAT, the drivers underpinning MAT growth, and the way sponsorship of underperforming schools by MATs occurs and proceeds have not been analysed in depth. The research we report here is intended to remedy that deficit and to enhance understanding and theorization.

Following this introductory section, we provide an overview of the policy developments and context that brought MATs into being. We then review significant concepts that are relevant to understanding MAT growth: systemic complexity and motivation. In the subsequent sections, we describe the methodology of the study and present the findings. In the discussion section, we review and interpret the main

issues to emerge from the empirical part of the research. In the final section, we recap on the issues we have addressed, summarize the research we have undertaken, and set out the main findings.

## THE POLICY BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Academies Act 2010 (Legislation.gov.uk, 2018) gave all schools in England the option of withdrawing from the remit of the local authority (LA) and becoming 'independent' state schools, known as academies. Academy schools in England receive their funding directly from central government rather than indirectly via the LA. Academies have more autonomy than those schools remaining with the LA; for example, they are not required to follow the national curriculum, they can set their own term dates and they are free to commission advice and support services that were formerly provided by the LA from any provider (DfE, 2018). Academization, together with the related development of free schools (Gov.uk, 2019) provided a mechanism through which parental choice, competition and autonomy were enhanced in the state-maintained school system in England (Simon, 2017). In many ways, a 'branded' education system has emerged that enables schools to turn their pedagogical beliefs and values into marketable commodities (Simon, 2017).

In a development subsequent to academization, academies have established formal groups, known as MATs. These are distinct legal entities with considerable financial autonomy. In recent years, the number of MATs has increased significantly (Greany and Higham, 2018; Simkins et al., 2018; Simon et al., 2017). Together, academization and the formation of MATs represent one of the most significant structural changes to the state education system in England since the 1944 Education Act (Simon, 2017).

One of the drivers of the expansion of individual MATs was, and continues to be, the 'funded invitation' they receive to 'sponsor' schools judged as inadequate following inspection by the Office for Standards in Education and Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) (Ofsted, 2018). In such instances, 'The Secretary of State will issue an academy order to a maintained school' and 'The school will then become a sponsored academy' (Gov.uk, 2018:1). Before the academies programme, the LA typically undertook this type of intervention and support.

The sponsorship of underperforming schools is initiated either by such schools approaching a MAT directly and asking to be sponsored, or by being 'brokered' to potential MAT sponsors, under powers devolved by central government to the Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) in 2015 (DfE, 2016c). In this latter case, the RSC 'owns' the relationship with the sponsor and has responsibility for negotiating strategic decisions (DfE, 2016d). If negotiations between the sponsoring MAT and the underperforming school are successful, the school would become an academy and join the MAT; if not, the school would be 're-brokered' (NAO, 2018b) to other MATs until the school was accepted into a MAT. Underperforming schools that do not improve as part of a sponsoring MAT may also be re-brokered. Once an underperforming school has joined a MAT, the MAT has specific responsibilities for improving it. This process is a significant aspect of a self-improving school system in which school-to-school support and inter-school collaboration are fundamental (Hargreaves, 2014).

In the 2010 Government White Paper 'The Importance of Teaching' (DfE, 2010), the Conservative Coalition Government made clear that school-to-school support was the preferred mechanism of school improvement (Hargreaves, 2014). School improvement was to rest with schools themselves rather than the LA. The assumption was that teachers were best placed to lead institutional development (Hargreaves, 2011). School improvement, therefore, became a collective responsibility of the school system. Replicating the model of nodal units in business (Hargreaves, 2010), 'Teaching Schools' were established as hubs of strategic alliances between schools (NCTL, 2017). Inter-school partnership structures were established as the basic building blocks of a self-improving school system (Hargreaves, 2014). Modelling patterns of system leadership, outstanding headteachers and their leadership teams were to work in collaboration with partner schools in order to improve them (NCTL, 2017). The emergence of MATs provided a useful structure for this model of school improvement. Teamwork and collaboration within and between schools were considered to be of mutual benefit (Armstrong, 2015). Collaboration is a fundamental issue in the education world; see, for example, the burgeoning growth of literature relating to collaborative models of leadership (Coleman, 2011; Kramer and Crespy, 2011; Middlewood and Abbott, 2018). It also lies at the heart of MAT leadership and development. Key issues emerging are the

nature of MATs and the way their structure has emerged, the motivations of central players – school principals/headteachers and CEOs of MATs – and why they do what they do (Latham and Pinder, 2005).

One important but often unconsidered aspect of the development of MATs has been the notion of stakeholder involvement. Arguably, as schools come together as groups the number of stakeholders that have an interest in any school in the grouping increases, adding intricate networks of collaboration. The way MATs emerged as structures in the English education system, therefore, has all the hallmarks of the way complex systems evolve (Hawkins and James, 2018; Mitleton-Kelly, 2003; Mitleton-Kelly and Davy, 2013).

## THE NATURE OF MULTI-ACADEMY TRUSTS

MATs are charitable companies (DfE, 2016b) and legal entities responsible for a number of academies. Arguably, each academy within a MAT is not an independent entity but ‘a unit of delivery within the larger hierarchical structure’ (Greany and Higham, 2018: 85). By law, schools cannot leave a MAT once they have joined unless they are re-brokered, and then they can only move to another MAT; they cannot return to the LA. The MAT board, which is the overarching governing entity of the MAT, decides via a scheme of delegation which powers are delegated to individual academies within the MAT (Greany and Higham, 2018). The autonomy promised to schools is thus under the control of the MAT board. Academies within a MAT have no autonomy to make local school-based decisions other than those authorized by the MAT board. Their autonomy depends on the MAT scheme of delegation (West and Wolfe, 2018). This arrangement would appear to put individual schools in a position similar to that which prevailed before the 1988 Education Reform Act when they were under the control of the LA. The growth of MATs appears to entrench status hierarchies across the system, with powerful/successful MATs taking over schools or other MATs that are less so. The approach contributes to the fragmentation of an increasingly complex state system of education in England (Glatter, 2017).

Academization has facilitated new configurations of school alliances and has increased the diversity of school types within the state-maintained education system

in England. Many MATs have 'brand names' such as the Academies Enterprise Trust, E-ACT and ARK. In many ways, these typify the 'academy project' where particular approaches to teaching and learning are depicted in the MAT name and/or image. For example, ARK's approach to education is based on 'six pillars' including high expectations, exemplary behaviour and excellent teaching (ARK,2018). MATs are able to market particular approaches to education and have absorbed former LA responsibilities, including school improvement and advisory roles (Simon, 2017).

MATs represent a departure from traditional forms of school groupings, such as clusters or federations (Greany and Higham, 2018). Whereas such alliances were informal and established within the same geographical area, MATs have formed out of the voluntary conversion of existing schools to academy status and/or the forced academization of underperforming schools. MATs typically have a number of structural features as follows.

1. They are hierarchical in nature. The CEO oversees the work of the headteachers of the academies in the MAT, and the MAT board monitors the work of the individual academy governing bodies.
2. MATs are not bounded geographically. They can spread across regional and county boundaries.
3. They are not limited in size.
4. MATs may comprise a number of different school types: primary; secondary; post-16; special or alternative provision (Greany and Higham, 2018).

Again, one of the implications of such formalized groupings is the growth of the number of stakeholders involved. According to Connolly et al (2016), stakeholders are those whose views should be taken into account by members of the organization. Stakeholders may have conflicting interests and areas of participation. Implicit in a stakeholder perspective is an understanding that stakeholders can be identified and engaged with 'and their interests/stakes identified, prioritized and responded to appropriately, all of which may be problematic' (Connolly et al., 2016: 3). Stakeholder influence and interaction may be formal/informal, constant/intermittent, regular/irregular or focused/diffuse. Importantly, the nature of the interaction will vary depending on whether the relationship is regulatory, competitive, collaborative or a mixture of these forms. Each school in the MAT will

have stakeholders with a particular interest in that school, which together increase the total number of stakeholders involved. Ensuring representation of those stakeholders in the governance structure of the MAT is problematic and is dealt with in various ways according to the governance arrangements of the MAT. Parents and the wider community who have an interest in any school in the MAT will increase in number as the MAT grows.

## A COMPLEXITY PERSPECTIVE AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE GROWTH OF MULTI-ACADEMY TRUSTS

The early growth of MATs in England was emergent with very little planning by central government or indeed local government, which has been largely marginalized in the growth of MATs. Emergence is one of the key consequences of systemic and organizational complexity (Hawkins and James, 2018). It arises from the central feature of complex human systems, that of interaction. It is interaction that makes complex human systems complex.

Interactions in complex human systems are varied in nature, have a history and are non-linear –it is difficult to predict the outcome of any interaction. Feedback in the interaction process is important and frames the totality of an interaction. Interactions require the capability, opportunity and motivation to interact. Institutional dimensions condition interactions. The legitimacy of interactions and the extent to which the institutional primary task (Bunnell et al., 2017) conditions interactions are important. Other factors such as the heterogeneity of interactors, the number of interactors and the opportunities for interaction also frame a system's interactional nature (Hawkins and James, 2018).

The interactional nature of a system has a number of consequences (Hawkins and James, 2018)all of which relate to emergence. In emergence, new properties and behaviours emerge where there is a critical mass and diversity of elements or agents clustering together (Mason, 2008a). It is in the 'dynamic interactions and adaptive orientation of a system that new phenomena, new properties and behaviours emerge' (Mason, 2008b: 7). Mason argues that system change is less to do with effecting change in one element but rather it is about generating momentum in a new direction, through attention to as many factors as possible.



In complex human systems, there is emergence within the system and in the systems in its environment. Interrelationships and patterns of interaction develop through interactions; there is potential for constructive synergy, with the whole of a complex human system becoming more than the sum of the parts. Emergent properties are subject to competitive pressure, emerge in hierarchical levels and nest within other emergent system properties. Importantly, there is potential for self-organization through interactions and for whole-system evolution. One of the central issues here is the motivations of those involved to interact in a complex environment, which is the issue we focus on next.

## MOTIVATION – AN OVERVIEW

In this brief overview, we consider the contribution motivation theory offers in illuminating the ways in which interaction and collaboration within and between stakeholder groups operates. It helps explain what shapes people's motivation within a social setting. The motivation of principal actors in schools and MATs is central to a school becoming an academy, to an academy forming or joining a MAT, and to an academy or MAT sponsoring an underperforming school. Motivation theory seeks to explain why people do what they do (Latham and Pinder, 2005). The satisfaction of needs underpins motivation to act. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) is probably the most well-known perspective on the role of needs in human motivations. The hierarchical model starts from the base level of physiological need, rising up the hierarchy through the need for belonging, the need for self-esteem, to the need for self-actualization. In recent times, self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan, 1985; 2000) and social exchange theory have received considerable attention. Whereas social exchange theory highlights the mutually rewarding processes of transaction or exchange between two actors which may include the interplay between dependence and power, SDT is a significant needs-based theory. It focuses on people's reasons for engaging in an activity, either because of the activity's intrinsic value or for the acquisition of an external reward by engaging in it. SDT is also concerned with the conditions that support and engender engagement in an activity because of its intrinsic value, which include autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 1985; 2000). These conditions foster intrinsic motivation and engagement, resulting in enhanced performance, persistence and

creativity. Values are grounded in needs and are important in shaping objectives and aspirations (Henne and Locke, 1985). They are similar to needs in the way they shape why people do what they do (Latham and Pinder 2005). However, while needs are inborn, values are acquired through experience (Latham and Pinder, 2005). Values vary in nature and are usually more readily articulated than needs. They serve as guiding principles for actions and behaviours across different contexts.

## METHODOLOGY

The research took place between October 2016 and May 2018 and was conducted in two phases. The first phase sought to establish the emerging patterns of sponsoring MATs by analysing the Department for Education's UK Schools Directory database Edubase2 ([www.edubase2.com](http://www.edubase2.com)). The analysis focused on the size, geographical spread and type of academies in the MATs and whether they were primary (students aged 4–11 years), secondary (students aged 11–16 years), secondary (students aged 11–18 years), post-16 academies, all-through academies (students aged 4–16/18 years) or academies for students with special educational needs. Any sponsorship arrangements were also analysed. The outcomes of this analysis are set out in the Findings section below.

In the second phase, 11 MAT CEOs were interviewed in order to further explore emerging patterns of trusts, the factors affecting the growth of the MAT and the nature of sponsorship. We acknowledge that the article analyses the espoused views of CEOs and that these views are only one of a range of perspectives. However, the voice of CEOs is important. Analysing the CEOs' views has enabled us to capture their motivations for academization and school sponsorship.

From our analysis in Phase 1, it was clear that MATs varied considerably and most notably in the:

- type of academy comprising the MAT;
- geographical spread of academies in the MAT within or across LA boundaries;
- geographical spread of academies in the MAT across RSC boundaries; and

- size of the MAT – small (2–5 academies); medium (6–14 academies); large (15 or more academies).

In the sample, all categories were represented. The sample was as follows.

Sample group chosen for the types of academy comprising the MAT:

RS1 9 academies: all primary, within a single LA

RS2 2 academies: all secondary in a single LA

RS3 6 academies: 5 primary, 1 secondary in a single LA

RS4 4 academies: all primary within a single LA

Sample group chosen for the geographical spread of academies in the MAT within or across LA boundaries

RS5 3 academies: all secondary across more than one LA boundary

RS6 29 academies: all primary across three LA boundaries

Sample group chosen for the geographical spread of academies in the MAT across boundaries of the regions overseen by RSCs

RS7 68 academies: 33 primary and 30 secondary across multiple LA and RSC boundaries

Sample group chosen for the size of the MAT

RS8 4 academies: 3 primary and 1 secondary within a single LA

RS9 8 academies: all primary in a single LA

RS10 5 academies: 2 primary, 2 secondary and 1 special school in a single LA

RS11 8 academies: 7 primary and 1 secondary in a single LA

The first round of interviews focused on MATs located in one specific region of the south-west of England. We interviewed four CEOs, one from each sample group. The second round of interviews took place between September 2017 and May 2018. Seven CEOs across England were interviewed to explore in greater depth issues that had emerged from the interviews in the first round.

The CEO of each MAT was contacted by email and invited to participate in a telephone interview. The research followed a naturalistic approach (Cohen et al.,

2005). The interviews explored the background and history of the MAT; the drivers for becoming a sponsor; the issues and challenges of sponsorship and how these have been resolved; structural issues, such as the number of schools sponsored, the geographical spread and the resource benefits, such as teacher supply. A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts followed. The research adhered to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines for the ethical conduct of research (BERA, 2011).

## FINDINGS

~~ The patterns of sponsorship in multi-academy trusts ~~

At the time the first phase of the research was completed, 531 academy trusts were listed as 'school sponsors', of which 385 (72%) were MATs and 100 (19%) were single academies. Forty-six (9%) were registered as sponsors but at the time had no underperforming schools affiliated to them.

Of the 385 sponsoring MATs, 237 (61%) comprised between two and four schools; 99 (26%) had between five and 10 schools and 49 (13%) comprised over 10 schools. In terms of location, 333 (86%) of the sponsoring MATs, including the 100 single-academy trusts, operated in a single LA area. The remaining 52 sponsoring MATs (14%) operated across a number of LAs, the most extreme example comprising academies in 19 LAs across England.

The type of academies comprising the sponsoring MATs varied, ranging from just one type of academy (that is, only primary, secondary or academy schools for students with special educational needs), to those made up various types of academy. There were:

- 110 (29%) sponsoring MATs comprising only primary schools and 32 (8%) sponsoring MATs comprising only secondary schools;
- 61 MATs (16%) comprising one or more secondary schools with a larger number of primary schools.
- 80 (21%) MATs that included all-through schools, further education establishments, pupil referral units and special schools.

Where sponsoring MATs were located within a single LA area they were small and based typically on two or three primary schools and a single secondary school. The majority of MATs, however, had establishments located in a number of LAs.

In summary, sponsoring MATs had very varied structures, were geographically diverse and had a range of different lead educational institutions, organizations, individuals and contexts promoting or limiting their growth. In the sections that follow, we review the formation and growth of MATs; the motivations of the key players; and the challenges associated with multi-academy formation and growth.

~~ The formation and growth of multi-academy trusts ~~

The data on the development of MATs over time revealed a complex and varied pattern with two main sub-themes: formation and growth. Those MATs established relatively early after implementation of the 2010 Academies Act often developed as a mutually supportive alliance of two or three schools. Headteachers and senior management teams initially engaged in discussion opening up to wider consultation with staff, pupils, parents and the local community. Significantly, a focus on school improvement via sponsorship arrangements was not a key concern at the outset but became a factor in MAT growth following the introduction of RSCs in 2014.

MAT formation typically occurred through CEOs actively seeking other schools with whom to form an alliance, or through approaches made by other schools wishing to join the MAT. RS1 had a proven record of accomplishment and for supporting underperforming schools. The LA recognized this record and approached RS1 to take on a school judged as inadequate in recent Ofsted inspections. By contrast, RS4 had actively 'put out feelers' to local schools that were themselves in loosely federated arrangements. At initial discussions to explore setting up a local MAT, these schools also 'brought their friends along', as R1 put it, as they feared the LA could no longer provide the services they needed. For RS8, there was a recognition that the challenges were local:

*They were more likely to sponsor if they knew the type of school they were taking on, the location and context or if they knew of another school that had been successfully sponsored nearby.*

Respondents took a strategic approach to such possibilities often configured by whether potential MAT members were similar in type, served a similar community, or were based in the same locality. For example, as RS8 stated somewhat emphatically, 'If I can't get to the other school in a lunchtime, they are too far away'.

While some trusts in our sample were keen to remain small, others had actively sought growth, with several MATs exceeding 30 schools. These large MATs had expanded rapidly in the early years immediately following the 2010 Academies Act. Unifying factors for schools within MATs were important in some instances. For example, one CEO commented that the three schools within the MAT represented 'one-school towns drawing [pupils] from a single community' (RS2), suggesting that while the schools themselves may be distinctive, the types of problems and issues faced would be similar. For others, the size of the MAT and the alliance of schools within it depended on proximity or knowing that other schools in an area had been successfully 'turned around'. Where MATs were medium-sized or large and extended beyond LA and/or RSC borders, pragmatic decisions were taken whereby schools were formed into local hubs, as was the case for RS5 and RS6.

Consolidation and sustainability of MAT collaborations were themes clearly evidenced across our sample. CEOs spoke of learning from lessons from previous experience in terms of growing too quickly: 'If the original purpose was for MATs to grow to a certain size the realization is now this is not a tenable model. Talk is about local clusters'. (RS5).

In relation to school sponsorship, the assumption that schools could be turned around within 12 months was changing, allowing sponsoring MATs time to get to know joining schools. According to one CEO:

*The Department (the Department of Education), RSCs and Ofsted had put a 12-month timeline on the turnaround. They are now changing the language – realizing it takes three years... Trust is building but it takes time... it is a five-year job to get the school where it should be (RS2).*

~~ The motivations of key players ~~

Motivations for taking on sponsorship of failing or inadequate schools varied. Depending on the context for change, motivations could be pragmatic (relating to the market positioning of the school in relation to its competitors and enhancing access to scarce resources in a shifting structural landscape); altruistic (an espoused motivation by many CEOs driven by altruism and the desire to share values, experience and good practice); and/or underpinned by moral purpose.

## PRAGMATIC MOTIVATIONS

The rationale in the early stages of the academies programme was essentially pragmatic to remain 'ahead of the game' (RS5), to create a MAT 'on our own terms' (RS5), or to maintain independence and identity. For some, it was a means of accessing funds. One CEO (RS5) explained how they 'ticked the box' to become a sponsor as part of the process of applying to become a Teaching Schools Alliance (DfE, 2018). Another claimed, 'We knew if we went into the system quickly we would get all the goodies on offer' (RS4). For RS4, the intent to maintain independence, and not be part of another MAT, thus retaining the school's identity, was the principal driver for adopting MAT status. Others, in various ways, acknowledged they were acting in their own self-interest.

## ALTRUISTIC MOTIVATION

The transmission of values and good practice, in the form of sponsorship, financial management and governance, emerged as a theme. Overall, the CEOs were both strategic in terms of vision and purpose but equally responsive to local context in the support of underperforming or 'orphan' schools; those schools that were perhaps geographically isolated and in need of LA support which was declining. According to one CEO: 'There are principles that determine growth so the offer is strong. [We are] open and honest about aims and values' (RS6).

## MORAL PURPOSE AS A MOTIVATION

Many of the CEOs were headteachers of schools classified as outstanding by Ofsted or had led Teaching School Alliances offering support to new and experienced teaching staff. Clarity of vision and purpose underpinned by a strong moral purpose

was key. This moral purpose was particularly evident among CEOs of MATs comprising only primary academies, for example, R1:

*If we have the expertise then we should be changing lives and for me professionally it was immoral for children to be attending schools that are failing.*

CEOs of sponsoring MATs typically felt that schools in special measures (that is, those considered by Ofsted to have fallen short of providing minimum standards of education), generally faced financial difficulties or had lost direction in terms of teaching and learning. Bringing about change therefore focused on tightening systems and processes, looking for efficiencies in school management and administration in order to move resources to teaching in order to affect student attainment.

Within the MAT structure, particularly in the context of taking on underperforming schools, the ability to gain the commitment of stakeholders (staff, pupils, parents and the local communities) was considered fundamental to long-term success. CEOs recognized that staff in sponsored academies might feel unwanted, particularly if joining a MAT was a second or third re-brokering arrangement. Setting vision and values took time because such staff felt they had 'heard it all before' (RS1). In this instance, RS1 made use of existing networks of schools to share experiences with the sponsored academy. Such strategies were about building trust in the relationship, focusing on educational achievement, and sharing subject specialism and expertise across schools.

Gaining the commitment of students was also significant for the CEOs. As RS2 put it: 'Students are receptive to great teaching – it is a powerful thing for the staff'.

Many of the CEOs interviewed were sensitive to the vulnerability of schools, particularly sponsored schools as they joined the MAT. RS2 felt 'There was real hostility and fear – inconsistencies in leadership – fragility of posts'. RS7 reported that 'Staff were really hurting...they needed an awful lot of support'. Interestingly, in bringing schools together of very different standards, RS11 saw the organization of the MAT 'as a mosaic rather than melting pot - all schools contribute to the colour of the MAT and maintain their identity rather than being lost in the mix'.



However, vulnerability did not lie wholly with sponsored schools. Those MATs taking on sponsorship were also making themselves vulnerable by adhering to moral and altruistic principles and putting themselves at financial or reputational risk or of changing relationships with local schools, communities or the LA.

## DISCUSSION

The aim of the research was to analyse the growth of MATs, their emergent structures and the attendant issues of sponsorship of underperforming schools. Our findings indicate that the (re)positioning of MATs is central to the establishment of a self-improving school system in England. The motivations of principal actors, such as MAT CEOs, is a substantive issue in MAT formation and growth. Collaboration with stakeholders, including the RSCs, plays a central role in MAT development. It is also clear from our analysis that there are substantive consequences of the growth of MATs in relation to the English government's school-improvement agenda and the sponsorship of underperforming schools. In this section, we discuss these findings in relation to the literature and theoretical perspectives we reviewed earlier. Given we were dealing with a rapidly shifting schools landscape we refer to the most recently published sources available at the time of writing.

~~ MATs and the self-improving school system ~~

Our analysis supports the literature on the development of the self-improving school system and demonstrates how MATs have been positioned as core to the programme of school-to-school support, which is argued to be a central feature of the self-improving school system (Hargreaves, 2011; 2014). The MAT structure is thus becoming the new unit of analysis within the English school system rather than the individual school. MATs are corporately responsible for school improvement through the sponsorship of underperforming schools, where the RSC acts as a monitor of school performance and broker between high performing MATs and underperforming schools (DfE, 2016d). Responsibility assigned by central government to high-performing schools engenders risk for the sponsoring MAT. MATs vary in terms of the number, type, geographical spread and size of their schools, and the level of student attainment in those schools. Risk is thus far from

evenly distributed across the school system. There are also potentially conflicting stakeholder interests here.

How easy it is for MATs to turn down overtures from the RSC to sponsor schools and whether brokered or re-brokered schools have any leverage in this process is unclear. This observation raises the issue of those schools unable to find a willing MAT capable of improving the school's performance, so-called 'orphan schools' (Mansell, 2017). According to more recent National Audit Office data (NAO, 2018a) there were some 37,000 pupils in maintained schools rated inadequate in January 2018 more than nine months after the inspection rating was delivered. This situation, according to the NAO (2018), contravenes Department of Education directive academy orders where such schools are to open as sponsored academies within nine months. The shortage of sponsors and MATs with the capacity and motivation to support new academies contributes to this issue. Furthermore, particular types of school, for example those facing challenges in terms of falling pupil numbers or reduced funding, find it less easy to attract a sponsor. Small rural primary schools fall into this category (NAO, 2018a). Greany and Higham (2018: 37) referred to the perceived pressure on schools felt by governors and headteachers to 'jump before they were pushed', forming or joining a locally determined MAT before they were forced to do so.

The process and impact of brokerage and re-brokerage on those schools deemed underperforming and their LAs does indeed appear harsh, irrespective of the reasons for underperformance. Our data indicates that for most schools the difficulties they face reside in financial management rather than the core business of teaching and learning. Once brokerage is successful, the day-to-day professional responsibilities of the existing headteacher, leadership team, teaching and administrative staff are overseen by the MAT, with promises of 'earned autonomy' in some instances depending on performance. Joining or forming a MAT, therefore, underlines the uneven power distribution and hierarchies within the emerging system.

~~ The motivation of stakeholders in MAT formation and growth ~~

The data give some interesting insights into the complexity of the motivations of those centrally involved to become academies in the first instance and then to form

MATs and to sponsor under-performing schools. Clearly, these motivations were conditioned by a sophisticated interpretation of and interaction between the individual's needs and a substantially changing environment (Latham and Pinder, 2005). The outcomes of that interpretation and interaction affected a range of motivations, from blatant self-interest, to a more altruistic motivation, to a yet more sophisticated interpretation of interests and events in which a whole range of motivations are brought into play.

A pragmatic motivation was evident, underpinned by a desire for self-protection to seek a place of safety for their institutions protecting their status, achievements and autonomy in a rapidly changing environment. Acknowledgement of this desire suggests the needs at the foundation of the hierarchy of individual needs (Maslow, 1943). An altruistic motivation was also evident combined with a sense of moral purpose, that somehow supporting struggling schools was 'the right thing to do'. In so doing, it may have enhanced individual needs for belonging and self-esteem (Maslow, 1943). The close association between motivation and action is complex.

The data also conveys a strong sense that those responsible for extending the MAT through sponsorship was underpinned by a desire for a form of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943; Deci and Ryan, 1985; 2000). In this process, there appeared to be a fulfillment of the moral purpose of schools and educational leadership. Those we spoke to endeavoured to hold together a competitive desire to 'be the best' with a desire to share their expertise and support underperforming schools. They sought to integrate – to hold together the apparently incommensurable opposites – of competition and collaboration. Such an approach requires an advanced sense-making capability which comes with the later stages of adult ego development (James et al., 2017). There is apparently a desire to retain individual autonomy and self-interest while acknowledging the grounding in the group, the inter-independent position (James et al., 2017; McCauley et al., 2006). Where success was evidenced, CEOs seemed willing to extend their practice to take on the sponsorship of further schools, perhaps demonstrating a desire for self-actualization. Deci and Ryan's (1985; 2000) observation that the conditions which foster intrinsic motivation and engagement result in enhanced performance, persistence and creativity is significant here.

~~ The role of the Regional School Commissioners ~~

While our principal focus has been on the role of the CEO, the data indicated increasing responsibilities of the RSCs who were appointed in 2014 as a pragmatic response to the need to provide oversight of the growing number of academies (HOC, 2016). Standing between the Secretary of State and the LA, they have the responsibility to challenge underperformance in maintained schools with a view to providing a sponsor. The addition of this middle tier to the governance of MATs has introduced a tightly controlled and hierarchical element at regional level to what hitherto had been a complex system of emergence and growth. The eight regions intersect traditional county and LA boundaries as well as those of church diocese, adding further complexity to the system. Our data indicate that the processes for brokering and re-brokering underperforming schools to sponsoring academies lacks transparency. RSCs play a key role in orchestrating the merger and takeover approach (Greany and Higham, 2018). Relationships between schools and the RSC can vary and reflect the status hierarchies and inequalities inherent in a performance- and outcomes-focused system. RSC intervention reverberates across communities, having consequences for standalone academies, MATs and local authority community schools alike.

~~ The consequences of the growth of multi-academy trusts ~~

The evolution of MAT structures over time indicates a continuum of complex, loosely coupled, organic systems (Hawkins and James, 2018) at one end and tightly controlled, hierarchical systems at the other. Those schools opting into the academies programme early on were able to take advantage of the promised autonomy (DfE 2018) of academy status by exercising the freedoms to grow the MAT according to their own agendas, take on the sponsorship of underperforming schools and expand or control growth as they saw fit. In this manner, the complex and interactional nature of the system promoted creative and proactive responses to the opportunities opened up by new policy approaches to the governance of English schooling system. However, through the growth of MATs, the autonomy promised to academy headteachers was in reality transferred substantively to the MAT board and the CEO. In other words, the freedom to innovate, to do things differently and to respond to local need devolved upwards significantly.

By 2014, even the autonomy of MAT CEOs was curtailed by the introduction of RSCs, creating a direct line of authority and chain of command to the Secretary of

State for Education. Powers accrued by the Secretary of State, represented at operational level by the National Schools Commissioner and respective RSCs, has resulted in a tightly controlled hierarchical system emerging whereby MATs represent a national system of schooling, 'locally' managed by the RSCs.

The construction of MATs has led to changes in individual school working practices. The formalization of collaborative processes across MATs has encouraged more strategic use of resources, including the employment and deployment of staff, the sharing of expertise, the centralization of back-office systems and monitoring processes. For some of the participants in our study the adoption of underperforming schools within the MAT had contributed to a drain in resources such that sponsorship was regarded as a high-risk activity.

The growth of MATs meant that they were positioned by the central government at the forefront of the self-improving school agenda. Whereas individual MATs may be able to report individual success in terms of school improvement, current data on pupil performance suggests no clear evidence that overall pupil attainment has improved, especially for those facing the most challenging circumstances (Greany and Higham, 2018; NAO, 2018a).

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

We began our research with a desire to understand better the formation of MATs, the drivers for MAT growth and the role of MATs as sponsors of underperforming schools in England. Our analysis shows the development of a state schooling system, tightly managed by RSCs and dependent on the altruistic values, tenacity and resilience of some CEOs of MAT boards in order to make a difference to the underperformance in English schools. There is a lot at stake here and we call on scholars to undertake further research into the issues we have reported here in order to fully understand the nature and dynamics of the complex public education system that is emerging in England.

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