

Self-policing or self-improving?: analysing peer reviews between schools in England through the lens of isomorphism

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Abstract

Peer reviews are not compulsory for schools in England, but they have become increasingly common in recent years. There is no single model for how peer reviews operate, but they generally involve staff from at least one other school in reviewing practice in the host school and feeding back their findings. This chapter reviews case study examples and data drawn from two recent studies led by the author (Greany and Higham, 2018; Greany, 2018). It analyses specific examples and assesses how far these reflect the three forms of isomorphism (coercive, mimetic and normative) identified by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). It finds evidence for all three forms of isomorphism, although they generally interact in hybrid forms. Overall, this analysis supports Greany and Higham's argument that peer review reflects a process of self-policing by schools in response to England's hierarchical and panoptic accountability system. The more recent study (Greany, 2018) indicates that many Multi-Academy Trusts are moving away from peer reviews towards more hierarchically controlled approaches to assessing school quality as part of a wider set of processes aimed at aligning or standardising practices across schools. However, the available evidence supports DiMaggio and Powell's conclusion that organisational homogenisation is not necessarily associated with improved performance except where it is combined with wider processes of professional learning for all staff. The chapter concludes by discussing these findings in relation to recent developments in the English school system as well as wider debates on quality, accountability, homogenisation, improvement and innovation in contemporary school systems.

Key words: peer review, isomorphism, educational improvement and innovation, school leadership, governance, self-improving school system

Introduction

Few would argue with the assertion that publicly funded schools should be high quality (Woods and Macfarlane, 2017), so the more significant questions are around what is meant by quality and how it can best be secured across multiple schools serving a range of different contexts. These questions raise further issues: does a focus on quality inevitably require some degree of standardisation and consistency, for example in the ways that school outcomes are assessed and the ways that schools are held accountable for these outcomes? If so, will such standardisation stifle innovation by imposing restrictive homogeneity, or will it enhance innovation by focussing collective improvement efforts on clearly defined and widely shared goals and success measures? Finally, what kinds of governance, accountability and support mechanisms might be most appropriate in order to balance the need for both quality and innovation in school systems?

School reform and governance changes across different school systems around the world have grappled with these issues over several decades (Greany, 2016). However, in recent years a degree of consensus appears to have been reached: for example, both the OECD and the World Bank now argue that policy makers should grant schools a level of autonomy, especially in relation to

curriculum and pedagogy-related matters, whilst holding them accountable for clearly defined outcome and quality measures (OECD, 2013; Bruns et al, 2011).

School quality has thus become equated with accountability processes that can measure and benchmark schools using standardised data (Ozga, 2009). Yet, in the process, it seems that innovation, agency and adaptive responses to different contextual needs can become compromised. For example, Hallgarten et al argue that modern education systems are stuck ‘in improvement mode’ (2015), with a narrow focus on raising measurable standards preventing schools from focussing on the real needs of learners in the 21st Century. These commentators argue that, as a result, many school systems face a crisis of legitimacy, with issues such as learner disengagement and stress, growing costs, frustrated teachers, challenges with equity and a mismatch with society’s real needs (Sahlberg, 2011).

Addressing these issues is not straightforward. Having simple and widely understood ways to evaluate school quality and to hold school leaders accountable for the use of public funds is arguably important, and can enhance the legitimacy of a system in the eyes of parents, employers and other stakeholders (Ehren et al, 2015). Such approaches can also enhance equity, for example by ensuring that minimum standards are achieved and that additional resources can be focussed on children or schools where this is not the case (OECD, 2018). But the downside may be that setting out and enforcing hierarchically defined standards for school quality will lead to homogeneity and inflexibility at a time when schools and education systems should arguably be more rather than less responsive to the changing needs of students and the changing world that they are growing up in (OECD, 2015).

Some school systems have attempted to resolve this by implementing ambitious reforms from the centre aimed at securing key innovations, for example to develop ‘21st Century skills’ in the curriculum. However, these centrally driven reforms tend to have limited impact at classroom level (Hall, 2013) and some have been actively rejected by parents and wider stakeholders (Newton and Da Costa, 2016; Waslander, 2010). Other systems have introduced market reforms aimed at increasing choice and making schools more responsive to their communities, but the evidence of success is limited and such diversity can impact negatively on equity (Lubienski, 2009).

These examples reinforce the message from O’Leary and Craig, who argue that ‘central prescription takes us only so far and decentralised policies don’t take us very far at all’ (2007:8 cited in Cousin, 2019:7). This recognition that both hierarchical and market-based forms of co-ordination have their limitations has led to a growing interest in network-based approaches to co-ordinating school systems in recent years (Suggett, 2014; Hargreaves, 2012).

Peer reviews between schools in England offer an interesting lens on these issues (see Box 1 for a summary of what peer reviews involve and how they have developed in England). Peer reviews undoubtedly represent an innovation, at least in the process of how schools work together to evaluate quality, but to what extent do they reflect a more fundamental shift in the English school system, away from hierarchical and market-based forms of control and towards network-based forms of governance (Ehren and Perryman, 2017)?

Proponents of peer review argue they represent a move away from hierarchical forms of accountability, inspection and performance management of schools (Matthews and Ehren, 2017; Berwick and John, 2017; Gilbert, 2012), opening up the potential for polycentric models of accountability that balance the perspectives of different stakeholders and encourage the development of collective effort and efficacy (Janssens and Ehren, 2016). Others highlight the potential for peer reviews to enable schools and teachers to learn from and support each other, allowing effective practices to spread across a network (Matthews and Headon, 2015). Hargreaves (2012) argues that such rigorous peer evaluation and challenge is the basis for a self-improving school system.

However, from a critical perspective, peer reviews may simply indicate the next stage in the evolution of the hierarchical accountability system, with schools self-policing their own performance in order to conform to the requirements of the performance management framework (Greany and Higham, 2018). Such an analysis reflects the argument that school inspections form part of a wider panoptic – or post-panoptic – regime in the English context (Courtney, 2014; Perryman, 2009). Thus, schools face constant surveillance and the potential for punitive sanctions if they are deemed to be failing, so they must work to internalise and perform to the standards and expectations set by the inspectorate and accountability regime, even though these standards are frequently fuzzy and are constantly changing. In this interpretation, peer reviews, like school self-evaluations, reflect an internalisation of these requirements by schools and an attempt by schools to conform to the externally established standards they have been set.

This chapter debates these issues by drawing on case study examples and data from two recent studies of school networks and partnerships led by the author (Greany and Higham, 2018; Greany, 2018).¹ The central question it seeks to address is whether peer reviews serve to reinforce the external accountability system and quality metrics, in the process making schools more homogenous, or whether peer review offers a means for schools to take ownership of what is meant by ‘quality’, enabling diverse, innovative responses to contemporary challenges? It analyses these examples through the lens of new institutional theory, in particular the three forms of isomorphism (coercive, mimetic and normative) articulated by DiMaggio and Powell (1983).

¹ Greany and Higham (2018) included four detailed locality case studies as well as a national survey and different statistical analyses. Greany (2018) included 31 case studies of school groups as well as a national survey. See Greany and Higham, 2018 and Greany, 2018 for detailed research methodologies.

The author is also part of a team that is currently evaluating the impact of a collaborative peer review model (School Partnership Programme) for the Education Endowment Foundation, although no data from that project is drawn on here. See <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/schools-partnership-programme-spp/> accessed 18.3.19.

Box 1: Peer reviews between schools - a recent phenomenon in England

Peer reviews between schools in England are a recent phenomenon, but have become increasingly common in recent years (Matthews and Headon, 2015). For example, an extensive review of the school leadership landscape in England published in 2012 made no mention of peer reviews (Earley et al, 2012), whereas a national survey of primary and secondary headteachers published in 2018 indicated that nearly half (44%) of all schools had engaged in peer review in the previous year (Greany and Higham, 2018). The survey indicated that peer review is now one of the most common forms of improvement support for schools and that it is rated highly by school leaders in terms of impact (see Fig 4.1, below). This increase has occurred despite the fact that peer review is voluntary for schools; while England's inspectorate (Ofsted) has required schools to undertake self-evaluations since the early 2000s, and uses these as part of its own external inspections, it has never required or encouraged peer review.

A number of organisations have developed different models of peer review, which are offered more or less commercially for schools and school networks to use. Examples include Challenge Partners, CUREE, the Education Development Trust (EDT), the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), UCL Institute of Education and Whole Education.² However, the evidence presented in this chapter indicates that many – perhaps most - schools and school groups develop their own, bespoke approaches to peer review.³ The analysis in this chapter relates to these bespoke approaches, rather than to any of the models listed above, except where a specific model is named.

This diversity of approaches to peer review makes it difficult to generalise about common features or principles underpinning the concept, although several illustrative examples are given throughout this chapter. What is clear is that peer reviews always involve staff from at least one other school in formally reviewing an aspect of practice within the host school and in feeding back their findings. In this respect, peer reviews differ from other forms of school evaluation and accountability in England, such as internal/self-evaluations, formal inspections by Ofsted, and reviews undertaken by school oversight bodies such as Local Authorities or Multi-Academy Trusts. Equally, peer reviews differ from other forms of networking and collaboration between schools, for example through subject networks or school to school support, although such activities often occur alongside or as a result of peer reviews.

[Insert Fig 4.1 here]

Hierarchical accountability as a driver of behaviour in England's 'self-improving, school-led system'

Understanding why and how peer reviews have developed in England in recent years requires an understanding of the wider shifts in policy and practice that have been underway since the election

² For details of the Challenge Partners, the Education Development Trust (EDT), the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), UCL Institute of Education models see chapters [a, b, c and d](#) of this book. For details on CUREE's model see http://www.curee.co.uk/peer_review and for Whole Education see http://www.wholeeducation.org/pages/overview/peoples_stories/763,0/peer_review.html accessed 4.1.18.

³ For example, of the 47 case study schools visited by Greany and Higham, around half were involved in some form of peer review, but all of these were bespoke and none drew on the organisations listed here.

of a Conservative-led coalition government in 2010. That government and the Conservative governments that have followed it have pursued a set of policies that have included a rapid expansion in the proportion of schools that are academies, funded and overseen by central rather than local government and with increased 'freedoms' (i.e. autonomy) compared to Local Authority (LA) maintained schools.

A key strand in the rhetoric of the government's reforms since 2010 is that they will lead to greater innovation. The government has sought to reduce bureaucracy and claims that it trusts the profession to make appropriate decisions by increasing school autonomy (DfE, 2010). The government has also promoted diversity, by introducing new types of school, such as free schools and University Technical Colleges, arguing that these will 'drive innovation... and offer pupils and parents a new approach to education' thereby 'galvanising others to improve, especially in areas where parents are significantly dissatisfied' (ibid: 58, 78).

Greany and Higham's (2018) research evaluated the nature and impact of these reforms through the lens of governance theory (hierarchy, markets and networks). It included four locality case studies as well as a national survey and a set of statistical analyses. The research found that while the policy agenda since 2010 has emphasised the development of a 'self-improving, school-led system', in which schools operate in 'deep' partnerships and networks (Hargreaves, 2012) to share knowledge and capacity and thereby 'self-improve', the reality has been more complex and, frequently, problematic. While the Government has argued that its reforms are 'moving control to the frontline', the research shows that this is a partial and idealised account, with a strengthened accountability framework and continuing market forces serving to constrain the professionalism of teachers, to limit the autonomy of schools and to shape the ways in which knowledge and expertise are codified and exchanged.

Greany and Higham illustrate the pervasive influence of the national accountability framework, particularly as exercised through the inspectorate Ofsted⁴, on the thinking and practices of schools. They characterize this influence in terms of 'constrained professionalism' and 'coercive autonomy'. This influence results from the impact of inspection grades on schools, with punitive sanctions and interventions for schools judged to be performing poorly as well as more subtle impacts on the status of schools within local competitive arenas as they compete for pupils, staff and resources.

The influence of Ofsted is evident in the focus of school self-evaluations, improvement planning and the commissioning of advice and practice inspections ('mocksteds') from Ofsted-savvy consultants. It is also apparent in the language and thinking of school leaders as they describe their work, particularly at secondary level, suggesting that the accountability requirements have become internalised and are driving a relentless focus on consistency of practice within schools.

Importantly, the accountability framework is associated with increasing stratification between schools. Greany and Higham analysed national data from school Ofsted inspections over a 10-year period, which showed a relationship between inspection grades and the changing socio-economic

⁴ All schools in England are inspected by Ofsted and graded as either Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement or Inadequate.

composition of a school's student body. Schools that sustained or improved their judgement to Outstanding in the 2010–15 period saw, on average, a reduction in the percentage of students eligible for free school meals (FSM), while schools retaining or being downgraded to a Requires Improvement and Inadequate judgement saw, on average, an increase in FSM eligibility.

In this context, most schools in England have formed or joined networks, partnerships and alliances so that they can access information, support and challenge from other schools. Greany and Higham analyse these partnerships and find that they are usually seen to deliver benefits for their members, but that they are predominantly focused on meeting the demands of the accountability framework, as the examples of peer review set out below demonstrate. Forming and leading these networks is frequently problematic for schools in the context of market-based pressures to compete with other local schools. As a result, many of the partnerships analysed by Greany and Higham are more or less exclusive in their membership. Meanwhile, the government has encouraged and, at times, coerced schools to form or join Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs)⁵, arguing that this structure will secure efficiency and effectiveness, although the statistical analysis undertaken for the research challenges this assertion.

Greany and Higham argue that peer reviews demonstrate the extent to which schools in England have internalized the accountability requirements and are now 'self-policing' their work. This chapter builds on and deepens their analysis of peer review, including by introducing additional examples from the research that were not included in the main report for reasons of space. It also updates that research by discussing evidence from Greany's (2018) more recent study of school improvement models in MATs, federations, Teaching School Alliances (TSAs) and Local Authorities (LAs).

Isomorphism: 'What makes organisations so similar?'

This chapter analyses peer review through the lens of new institutional theory, in particular the three forms of isomorphism (coercive, mimetic and normative) articulated by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). Their article builds on Max Weber's analysis of the ways in which rationality, manifested through bureaucracy, serves like an 'iron cage' to control and standardise human activity as well as on Giddens' theories on the structuration of organisational fields. This chapter assesses peer review in relation to the three types of isomorphism and asks whether it contributes to greater innovation or standardisation in the context of hybrid governance mechanisms.

DiMaggio and Powell argue that "bureaucratization and other forms of organisational change occur as the result of processes that make organisations more similar without necessarily making them more efficient" (1983:147). Whilst innovation does occur in the early stages of a new organisational field, such as state schooling, once the field becomes established, "there is an inexorable push towards homogenisation" (ibid: 148) as organisations seek legitimacy. They argue that this is because such "similarity can make it easier for organisations to transact with other organisations, to attract career minded staff, to be acknowledged as legitimate and reputable, and to fit into administrative categories that define eligibility for public and private grants and contracts". Critically

⁵ Multi-Academy Trusts are charitable companies that oversee more than one academy, with a single board and CEO responsible for all aspects of performance and operations across the group. By July 2018 there were 1082 MATs overseeing 5850 academies in England.

though, “none of this, however, ensures that conformist organisations do what they do more efficiently than do their more deviant peers” (ibid: 153).

DiMaggio and Powell posit that homogenisation is a result of institutional isomorphism, defined as “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (ibid: 149). They set out three mechanisms for institutional isomorphic change, although these are not always distinct and can co-exist: i) coercive isomorphism stems from political influence and the problem of legitimacy; ii) mimetic isomorphism results from standard responses to uncertainty; while iii) normative isomorphism, is associated with professionalization.

Ehren (2019) analyses the influence of school inspection systems on thinking and practice in schools through the lens of isomorphism. As yet, however, this analysis has not been undertaken in relation to peer review.

Peer review as coercive isomorphism

Coercive isomorphism occurs in contexts where formal and informal pressures are exerted on organisations, either by other organizations upon which they are dependent or as a result of wider cultural expectations in society. Sometimes these pressures take the form of governmental mandates, particularly in a field such as publicly funded education, but they can also arise from the application of standard operating procedures in back office operating systems, such as contract law and financial accounting. These pressures may be felt as force, as persuasion, or as invitations to join in ‘collusion’ (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 150).

The description of England’s accountability system - with its floor targets, inspection handbooks, school rankings and powers of intervention - and the ways in which it influences the thinking and practices of schools is a clear example of coercive isomorphism. Ehren’s (2019) analysis of school accountability systems explores this influence in detail.

Despite being voluntary, peer reviews can still indicate coercive isomorphism if schools use them to prepare for an Ofsted inspection or to legitimise a set of actions that will bring the school in line with the expectations in the accountability framework. Such collusive behaviours are reflected in Greany and Higham’s characterisation of peer review as ‘self-policing’, a term that comes from one of the head teachers they interviewed.

Vignette 1, below, illustrates the ways in which the headteacher of a stand-alone secondary academy uses peer review to set a demanding agenda for change across the school. It is notable that he chooses to work with a government-designated National Support School, providing a level of officially approved legitimacy, and that the partnership is non-local, and so does not risk sharing knowledge with local competitor schools.

The vignette makes clear that peer review, at least for this school, is not regarded as an opportunity to develop collaborative work and learning between staff working at different levels. Rather, it is a leadership-level-only activity, which positions the school’s teachers as the cause of the ‘problem’ (i.e. the ‘flat-lining’ in exam results) which must be addressed through greater prescription and

tighter oversight. The actions resulting from the review are aimed at creating a 'no excuses' culture, including through the introduction of non-negotiables, quality assurance mechanisms and 'drop-in' lesson observations, all suggesting a move towards bureaucratic rule-bound performance management.

The fact that the peer review is more blunt than the SIP report, and so has to be toned down before it can be shared with staff, is also revealing. Rather than asking questions to encourage self-reflection, as the SIP does, the peer reviewers name specific staff who they say should be sacked. This idea that peer reviews allow for honest, even brutal, feedback recurs through many of the interviews with senior school leaders in the study and is also a theme in Vignettes 2 and 3. Several interviewees acknowledge that this 'honesty' can be demotivating for staff, for example if they receive such feedback directly. This relates to the points made below, in relation to Vignette 3, about the types of 'strong' school leaders who are prepared to engage in peer review.

DiMaggio and Powell make the point that isomorphism does not necessarily make organisations more effective. Greany and Higham's research design was not intended to enable an evaluation of the impact of peer review over time. However, it is notable that the school described in Vignette 1 has dropped steadily in its exam performance in the three years since the case study visit.⁶ This might not be surprising given the wider literature on school leadership and improvement, which indicates that successful schools tend to be characterised by high trust, aspirational and professional cultures in which staff and students are continually learning, rather than by managerial, rule-bound performance management-focussed processes (Daly and Chrispeels, 2008; Hopkins et al, 2014).

Vignette 1: The stand-alone secondary academy – peer review as coercive isomorphism

The headteacher of this stand-alone converter academy acknowledges that he does not seek significant partnerships with other local secondary schools because he sees them as competitors. For this reason, the headteacher has worked with two other secondary schools from further afield to develop a peer review model. One of the other schools is a National Support School (NSS).⁷ Reviews take place annually in each school, undertaken by heads and senior leaders from the other two schools, who present a written report on their findings.

The first review at the case study school investigated the school's hypothesis that there was an issue with its evaluation of teaching quality, given that this had found 93% of teaching to be Good or Outstanding based on lesson observations, yet the school's GCSE results were 'flat-lining'. The review included scrutiny of pupil work and assessed the school's systems, processes and policies for supporting teaching and learning.

⁶ The school went from being above average for Performance 8 and average for Progress 8 in 2016, to being below average for Performance 8 and well-below average for Progress 8 in 2017 and 2018.

⁷ These schools are designated by the government on the basis of performance criteria and are given additional funding to provide support to lower performing schools. The headteachers of such schools are designated as National Leaders of Education.

In parallel with this peer review, the school's practice in this area was also reviewed by its School Improvement Partner (SIP)⁸.

The headteacher explained that the peer review report was harder hitting than the SIP's:

They [i.e. the peer reviewers] came out basically and said, "Your middle leaders aren't aspirational at all. You've got a real problem amongst your staff making excuses for kids coming from such poor backgrounds." It was very blunt and I did have to slightly temper it before I put it out to all the staff... [the SIP's report] was saying the same thing in a much more delicate, but still pointed, way... What I did was basically marry the two reports up and present to governor's the common themes. We did get good triangulation. It was good to have it verified by a separate team.

Head teacher, secondary academy, Ofsted Good

This triangulation helped the headteacher to reinforce with staff the need for a cultural shift across the school aimed at developing a 'no excuses' culture, informed by processes in place in the NLE/NSS school that had undertaken the review. The action plan for creating this cultural shift included developing a set of non-negotiables with quality assurance measures to ensure rigorous checking of teaching quality. In addition, lesson observations moved to unannounced drop-ins, in place of the previous model where teachers had 24 hours' notice. There was also a shift in focus from targeting resources at Year 11 to targeting these at pupils from Year 7, with the development of pupil progress 'flight paths', involving more regular monitoring of progress backed by interventions where required.

Peer review as mimetic isomorphism

Mimetic isomorphism occurs in contexts where there is uncertainty, leading organisations to model themselves on similar organisations in their field that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 152). Preferred organizational models can be diffused by consulting firms or other organisations that promote 'best practices'.

Ehren (2019) shows how these processes operate in the context of school accountability in England. For example, Ofsted's thematic reviews and research reports on specific areas of practice are read avidly by schools, while its efforts to dispel the various 'myths' that abound (such as the idea that there is a preferred Ofsted teaching style or 'lesson') have had only partial success.

Greany and Higham show how the context for schools became more uncertain after 2010. This uncertainty was a result of several, overlapping factors: significant changes were made to the national curriculum and assessment model, while schools had to become more self-reliant as traditional forms of 'free' advice, support and challenge were reduced. For example, the head teacher in Vignette 3 explains that, with the collapse of the LA, "we had to sort our own houses out really".

⁸ An experienced advisor that the school buys in to review and advise on areas of practice as part of the annual improvement planning process

In this environment, Greany and Higham argue that knowledge and expertise around aspects of school improvement became a more important 'commodity' for schools. High-status 'system leader' schools, for example those designated by the government to lead Teaching School Alliances (TSAs) and as NLE/NSSs, frequently stepped in to provide this 'commodity', for example by offering paid-for professional development courses and advice to other schools in areas such as how to achieve a good Ofsted inspection grade. Greany and Higham argue that this 'new economy of knowledge' has incentivised a focus on the types of expertise that can most easily be codified and commoditized (as 'best practices') rather than on the Joint-Practice Development and learning processes advocated by Hargreaves (2012) as essential for a self-improving system.

Vignette 2, below, indicates the ways in which peer reviews can facilitate mimetic isomorphism. The head teacher faces high levels of uncertainty, given his school has been judged Inadequate by Ofsted and so faces being taken over by a MAT. He has sought out a group of "widely respected" (executive) heads from across the region, who have "worked at national level on things like curriculum" and who are presumably, in DiMaggio and Powell's terms, seen as "legitimate and successful" (1983: 152). The head is keen for his staff to actually see these models of effective teaching in action, so has taken them, en masse, to visit an NLE's school for a day. This approach differentiates this vignette from the last one, in that the headteacher is clearly keen to involve his staff in a process of learning from other schools. However, the peer review process itself involves only members of the leadership group from each of the three schools. Despite leaving the host head teacher like they have been "beaten up", the peer review is followed by "a massive wave of support" in terms of practical ideas and resources that the school can use as it works to mimic the practices observed in and advised on by the respected, high performing schools.

Interestingly, having performed well below average at the time of its Ofsted Inadequate judgement, three years after the case study visit the school scored well above average (compared to national levels) for its performance in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2. This suggests that where peer review is coupled with a serious effort to facilitate the learning of all staff as a means of securing mimetic isomorphism, it can lead to improvements. These issues are returned to below in the discussion of isomorphism, innovation and improvement.

This vignette focusses on a school that has been judged Inadequate by Ofsted, and so arguably has a strong imperative to mimic the practices it observes in higher performing schools. But mimetic isomorphism is also apparent in the other cases, where the hierarchical pressure to enhance performance is less acute. For example, the school in Vignette 3, below, is judged Good by Ofsted, but its headteacher explains in the quote below how he benchmarks his school against the performance of the Ofsted Outstanding schools in the partnership and aspires to reach their levels, providing a clear example of mimetic behaviour:

I think that's the first time I've gotten very clear understanding of what outstanding data looks like. And it's a different league to ours... And our challenge... is that we have to match that standard. We can go on about different cohorts or whatever else. It doesn't matter. We have to be as good as they are. So, our conversation there is how we set up our aspirations. How do we put in place support for our staff, so that we are all at that level, and that they're sustaining that level?

Headteacher, primary maintained, Ofsted Good

Vignette 2: the Inadequate primary school – peer review as mimetic isomorphism

This primary school had been judged Inadequate by Ofsted and was in the process of forced academisation (i.e. being sponsored by a MAT) at the time of the case study visit. The Head teacher had arrived at the school, his second headship, soon after the Inadequate judgement. He and his Deputy head argued that the school's previous Head had let the school become too insular, with virtually no recruitment from beyond the existing staff and very little collaboration with other schools. The new Headteacher's approach was therefore to open the staff's eyes to new and different models of practice, both within the local cluster and more widely. For example, he had taken the entire staff to visit a nearby National Leader in Education's school:

I wanted to show them the vision of what I wanted to achieve and where I wanted to be... Every teacher went down there and observed good and outstanding practice, looked at how the learning was structured and the language of learning. .

Head teacher, Maintained Primary, Ofsted Inadequate

The head had also invited in a group of other heads from across the region to undertake a peer review of the school:

I got four heads peer reviewing the school... I invited them in because they were people who were widely respected... I needed that – maybe this isn't the right choice of words – but maybe kind of that level of brutality and honesty.... They were all people with 2 or 3 schools, people with 500+ kids, people who've worked at national level on things like curriculum or whatever else.

Head teacher, Maintained Primary, Ofsted Inadequate

The Deputy Head argued that this peer review 'was really really good, and constructive, because when they said something was poor, they then had a suggestion for how to improve it'.

The headteacher is now engaged in a regular cycle of peer reviews with this group of heads. The format is that the heads arrive in the morning, before the school opens, and meet with the host headteacher. There is no set focus for the review and no protocols. The group tours wherever they like in the school for two and half hours, talking to pupils and staff who have been warned that the review is taking place. They then meet back together without the host head and review what they have seen before feeding back to the host:

And then you call the head back in and you feedback. But then the next bit's critical because the person by the end of it, feels like they've been absolutely beaten up. But probably by five o'clock that evening they'll have had ten, fifteen emails: 'Here's a teaching and learning plan you might want to look at', 'Here's something I've used', 'Come and look at this other school', 'Would you like some help on this?', 'I can broker this for you' - so it's a massive wave of support straight after.

Head teacher, Maintained Primary, Ofsted Inadequate

Peer review as normative isomorphism

The third source of isomorphic change stems from professionalization, as those working in a particular field establish professional standards, entry requirements and networks that set normative standards for how things should be done. Adhering to these professional standards and expectations is seen to help build organisational legitimacy, for example where organisations require certain qualifications as an entry standard for appointments.

Ehren (2019) highlights the decision taken by Ofsted after 2010 to increase substantially the proportion of serving school leaders trained as inspectors.⁹ These serving school leaders spend a number of days each year working with Ofsted's core team of HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectors) to undertake inspections. Ehren highlights this as one of the ways in which the accountability model facilitates normative isomorphism, not least because these Ofsted-trained school leaders then draw on their training to inform their work in their own schools.

Vignette 3 describes the tensions that occur between two groups of primary head teachers in one town: six of whom have volunteered to be trained as Ofsted inspectors and six that have not. The six Ofsted-trained head teachers propose adopting peer review across the cluster, but the non-Ofsted trained heads reject this. The Ofsted heads decide to go ahead anyway and, from this, develop a wider partnership and the SUCCESS TSA, which serves to entrench further the divide between the two groups.

This vignette reveals that normative isomorphic processes are not uniform and can involve significant tensions between different professional perspectives and value-sets. The head teacher explains that the six heads involved in SUCCESS "all viewed each other as equals," describing them as "fairly arrogant, strident characters." These six heads were all officially designated as system leaders, one as an NLE and the other five as Local Leaders of Education. The head teacher acknowledges that there has been an historic divide between the two groups, explaining that the other head teachers in the cluster saw the SUCCESS group as "class traitors" because they had been Ofsted trained.

The divide between the two groups of heads arose out of the choices and values of individual leaders, but these differences have become physically embodied in the local partnership structure. The Ofsted-trained heads felt there was a danger that their schools could slip back in performance terms after the LA collapsed, so they chose to use peer review as a means of "avoiding complacency". Meanwhile, the head teachers who resisted such inspectorial approaches are characterised as "vulnerable" "losers" in the new "capitalist" system.

This sense that there are two 'classes' of leader – those who embrace Ofsted and peer review and those who don't – comes through from the other examples in the study. For example, the head of the school in Vignette 2 explained: "You've kind of either got the stomach for it [i.e. peer review] or you haven't" and expressed sadness that "it's the people who often need it the most, who don't engage in it, because they feel scared or they're nervous or they're worried". This suggests that

⁹ For details see:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/465626/Ofsteds_inspection_workforce_from_September_2015.pdf accessed 22.3.19

normative isomorphism is not a uniform process, at least in a system that is going through a process of rapid change, but one that is dependent on individual character and professional values as well as circumstance. Some individuals, it seems, are simply more likely to volunteer to be trained as an Ofsted inspector, to apply to be designated as a system leader, and/or to see peer review as an opportunity for improvement of their school. Others reject such approaches, perhaps out of fear, but perhaps because they adhere to a different notion of what it means to be a leader.

Over time, it seems likely that the 'strong' style of leadership, as demonstrated by the SUCCESS heads, will come increasingly to dominate the system through a process that combines normative isomorphism with hierarchical incentives (Gronn, 2002; O'Brien, 2015). Essentially, the government encourages these kinds of behaviours and the leaders who demonstrate them are given greater influence over how the next generation of leaders should be identified and developed, meaning that, over time, their 'strong' style of leadership will come to be seen as the norm. For example, designated system leaders are funded and encouraged by the government to support or sponsor 'failing' schools, giving them the power to enforce their preferred ways of working and to appoint the next generation of head teachers. These same system leaders also tend to be invited to advise on new leadership standards for the profession and to design and deliver the government's National Professional Qualifications for Leadership (Cousin, 2019).

Vignette 3: The SUCCESS Alliance - peer review as normative isomorphism

The headteacher of this primary school, which is located in a small town, considers that collaboration has become increasingly essential for school improvement, in particular because the formerly strong Local Authority declined rapidly after 2010, which meant "we had to sort our own houses out, really". However, he felt that the local cluster, which included 12 primary schools, had failed to recognise the implications of this. The key sticking point was when six of the primary school heads proposed developing a model of peer review. The other six primaries resisted this proposal, but the proposing group decided to do it anyway:

Literally, as soon as we mentioned doing inspections in each other's schools, the room just divided in two, from "over my dead body" to those which were, "fine"... which was why SUCCESS [TSA] formed, because we wanted to move things at a higher pace than some of the other heads.

Head teacher, primary maintained, Ofsted Good

The head teacher feels that peer review avoids complacency, for example after a successful Ofsted, as it identifies what still needs to be improved. Each school is entitled to a yearly review of one of its school improvement priorities by two SUCCESS colleagues. Reviews typically comprise: data analysis, lesson observations, work scrutinies and pupil conferencing. To date, the school has received two reviews, covering maths and punctuation and grammar.

The head teacher feels that the process has worked well and that this is due in part to established trust between, and confidence in, each other as partners:

I think, partly because we all viewed each other as equals. If I'm honest, we're fairly arrogant, strident characters who believe we're right... the headteachers that visited (my school) pulled no

punches, telling staff what needed to improve, so that set the tone, if you like... (but) if we're saying we want our schools to improve, then we have to ask ourselves difficult questions.

Head teacher, primary maintained, Ofsted Good

Building on the peer reviews, the six schools had developed a range of wider partnership activities. One of the schools in the group had been designated as a Teaching School, with the other five schools as strategic partners in the SUCCESS Alliance. There is also discussion around the potential to become a MAT.

However, the head teacher acknowledges that the development of SUCCESS as a separate entity from the wider cluster has led to a division between the strong and less-strong schools in the locality:

SUCCESS appeared, because we felt we couldn't wait. The world was changing around us, and if we didn't do something, we'd be left on our own. I think it's unfortunate that probably the six strongest schools in [the cluster] formed SUCCESS. And that was to our shame, a little bit, I think, that the egalitarianism stopped. And I think that our vulnerable schools within [the cluster], within the locality, are on their own, because they weren't able or willing to join.

Head teacher, primary maintained, Ofsted Good

The head of the school admits to feeling deeply conflicted by this development, but feels that his response was the only option in the context of the government's policy framework:

I think it's a capitalist model. It's about school-to-school competition, and the government's very hot on that, and for that, there are winners and losers. And right now, I've taken the pragmatic, yet morally dubious position of 'I want to be with the winners', and that means I have to leave out some losers, some people who are vulnerable, on the outside. And we know that they're there. We know that they'd bite our arm off to come and join us. But we can't have lots of voices in the room if we're going to move things on quickly. And that's not fair.

Head teacher, primary maintained, Ofsted Good

Recent developments: a move away from peer reviews in MATs?

Greany's (2018) research provides an update on the Greany and Higham findings, both because the data was collected more recently and because it focuses on approaches within MATs, which have become a more central feature of the landscape in England in recent years.¹⁰

Greany and Higham's study included a statistical analysis of MAT impact as well as case study research in a small number of MATs. One of their findings was that MAT leaders feel a pressure to standardise practices across their member schools in the pursuit of higher standards, based on a perception that higher performing MATs are highly standardised. This suggests that coercive and mimetic isomorphism operate at MAT as well as school level, driven by the demands of the

¹⁰ Greany and Higham's case study research was undertaken in 2015-16, while Greany's was conducted in 2018.

accountability framework and by the formal and informal messages promulgated by the government. Given this finding it is interesting to ask how peer reviews operate within MATs

Greany (2018) identified a set of important contextual differences (such as size and composition) which influence how different MATs approach school improvement, indicating that this emerging field remains diverse at this early stage.¹¹ In terms of practices within MATs, the research found that most are focussed on standardising or aligning practices across member schools to some extent, although the extent of this differs between different areas of practice; for example, assessment practices tend to be more standardised, while curriculum and pedagogy tend to be less so.

The case study research found relatively few examples of peer reviews operating within MATs in the ways described in this chapter so far. Instead, it found that the majority of MATs were undertaking periodic school reviews led by a member of the MAT core team, such as the CEO, the School Improvement Director or, sometimes, an externally commissioned consultant. These MAT reviews generally take place termly or annually: although the regularity of these visits might be determined by an assessment of risk, with lower performing schools visited more often. The format of the MAT reviews is similar to a peer review, but with aspects that feel closer to a mock Ofsted inspection: for example, one School Improvement Director described how she identifies ‘lines of enquiry’ before she visits a school based on an analysis of the school’s data and self-evaluation.¹² Overall, these reviews were clearly positioned as a means of securing hierarchical accountability (i.e. to the MAT) and of identifying any performance issues in schools. For example, one Executive Principal described these reviews as “peer reviews with extra rigour, as sometimes peer reviews tend to be a bit woolly or a love-in” (2018:170).

Several MATs described these reviews as ‘peer reviews’ and many of these did include staff from other schools in the process (i.e. alongside the core team members). Such involvement was seen to provide a formative and developmental process for the staff involved. It also allowed the staff to propose ideas and to provide support to the school being reviewed if needed. This willingness to get involved in helping collectively to address the issues identified suggests that, at least for some MATs, the focus is on both accountability and support.

Discussion

Di Maggio and Powell asked ‘what makes organisations so similar?’ and argued that the three forms of isomorphism operate separately and in tandem to drive this homogeneity. In many ways their implied critique of the bureaucratic ‘iron cage’ is one that the Conservative-led governments in power since 2010 would subscribe to. For example, shortly before he was elected as Prime Minister in 2010, David Cameron argued that “the era of big government has run its course”. In its place he called for a ‘Big Society’ approach fit for a “post-bureaucratic age”, in which “the model of state-run

¹¹ Interestingly, MATs themselves are now being encouraged and facilitated to engage in MAT to MAT peer reviews by organisations such as Challenge Partners and Education Development Trust. For example see: <https://www.challengepartners.org/news/blog-evincing-mat-factor>

¹² Similarly, Ofsted inspectors develop ‘lines of enquiry’ based on an analysis of data.

schools, accountable to ministers and education bureaucrats will be replaced by self-governing state schools accountable to parents” (Cameron, 2009).¹³

In practice, as Greany and Higham show in detail, the changes introduced since 2010 have not unleashed the innovations that Cameron promised. The stripping away of Local Authorities combined with multiple changes to the curriculum, assessment and accountability systems has left schools feeling more sharply accountable in a system that has become increasingly centralised. The result is that schools feel more rather than less constrained and coerced, leading them to ‘self-police’ their work through voluntary peer reviews.

This suggests that Cameron’s vision of a ‘post-bureaucratic age’ and of self-governing schools accountable only to parents was, at best, naïve. Rather, the state has defined, in particular via the Ofsted inspection framework, the features of what it deems a ‘quality’ school, and continues to enforce these features through its inspection and accountability system. This quality framework is used to judge and rank schools in a formal sense, but also works through the isomorphic processes described here to drive a level of consistency – or homogeneity - in how schools operate. DiMaggio and Powell argue that such processes are more particularly common in publicly funded and operated systems, such as schooling: “the greater the extent to which the organisations in a field transact with agencies of the state, the greater the extent of isomorphism in the field as a whole” (1983: 154).

The three vignettes outlined in this chapter illustrate the ways in which peer review facilitates these isomorphic processes, thereby revealing the ways in which schools voluntarily ‘self-police’ their work. The evidence of coercive and mimetic isomorphism is particularly clear: the school leaders in these vignettes use peer reviews to benchmark their own school against others that they see as more (or equally) legitimate at a time of significant uncertainty around how best to respond to changing policy and accountability requirements. They use the findings from these reviews to prepare for their next Ofsted inspection, largely by setting an agenda for change that focuses on emulating the structures and processes in place at the higher performing schools that undertook the review.

The evidence of normative isomorphism is also strong, although this process is still evolving in England’s turbulent school landscape and there is some evidence of an alternative professional ethic that rejects peer review in Vignette 3. However, this professional dissonance should not be overplayed: in two of the four localities researched by Greany and Higham, nearly all of the secondary schools were engaged in a collectively agreed approach to peer review, indicating a higher level of normative alignment - or, at least, a greater acceptance of the need to conform with the requirements of the accountability framework - than in the vignette. Greany and Higham note differences between the primary and secondary phases in this respect, with some primary leaders more committed to the model of LA scrutiny of schools (and therefore generally less likely to engage in peer review) compared with their secondary peers.

¹³ David Cameron, ‘The Big Society’, speech given on 10th November 2009 <https://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601246> accessed 10.5.19

While the three forms of isomorphism are addressed separately here, in practice they overlap and interact, partly as a result of wider processes that result from hybrid governance processes. The vignettes frequently illustrate these interactions, but they also suggest a hierarchy in terms of how the three processes operate, with coercive isomorphism – expressed most simply as a fear of, and need to align with, Ofsted – acting as the primary driver of behaviour in all three examples. Greany and Higham’s report shows in detail how the hierarchical pressure exerted by the accountability framework interacts with quasi-market pressures on schools, which result from the need to compete for students and resources within a context of parental choice and local status hierarchies. So, for example, school leaders report that by improving their school’s Ofsted grade they can signal to parents that the school is successful, which can enable them to attract a more aspirational intake and thereby further enhance their likelihood of success in Ofsted terms. However, in the process, other local schools can be disadvantaged by these changes. These pressures serve to influence how and where schools collaborate: for example, we saw in Vignette 1 that the headteacher chose to collaborate beyond the locality due to competitive tensions, and in Vignette 3 the role of peer review in splitting the local community of schools into two groups.

Mimetic isomorphism can be seen as a parallel but, perhaps, less dominant process when compared with coercive isomorphism. The schools are motivated by – or are in collusion with - the coercive requirements of the accountability framework, but they must also engage in mimetic processes in order to identify and transfer systems, processes and practices from Ofsted-successful schools to their own in the context of considerable policy-generated uncertainty. However, the extent to which these mimetic processes lead to genuine changes in classroom practice is not straightforward. Because the peer reviews generally involve only one or two members from the senior leadership team in each school, there are limited opportunities for staff to learn from each other as part of the review process. As a result, the new processes introduced on the back of peer reviews may not have the desired impact: if anything, they may distract and demotivate teachers and undermine the kinds of high trust, collaborative professional cultures that are known to underpin school improvement. We saw this in the first vignette, where the school declined in its overall performance after the new practices were introduced. By contrast, the school in the second vignette, where all staff were involved in visiting and learning from the high performing school, has improved its performance. This suggests that peer review as mimetic isomorphism may have limited efficacy unless it is combined with a serious focus on enabling staff to learn from and to adopt and adapt the desired approaches to their context.

Meanwhile, normative processes overlay these developments, helping to explain which leaders are more and less likely to engage and to indicate why certain types of leadership behaviours become embedded across the system over time. What is less apparent in these brief examples, but comes through in Greany and Higham’s full report, is how these forces interact to shape patterns of collaboration, competition and change across local school landscapes. This analysis reveals, for example, how national ‘system leadership’ designations, such as NLE/NSS status, can structure local governance arrangements and status hierarchies, determining which individual leaders hold most sway.

Turning to the question posed in the Introduction, it seems unarguable that the three examples of peer review described here are serving to reinforce England’s high stakes, panoptic accountability

system, through 'self-policing'. This challenges the arguments made by advocates of peer review, as outlined in the Introduction. Rather than the "self-accounting – even self-regulating school system" pictured by Matthews and Ehren (2017:50), the vignettes seem closer to Perryman's (2009:628) description of school self-evaluation: "The teachers (or rather management) are (now the) inspectors, but without the power to make judgements. They are merely the warder, not the director of the prison with the power to liberate or punish".

Greany and Higham do report that a minority of their interviewees saw peer review as providing "a space 'outside' the accountability system in which to be honest without fear of reprimand" (ibid:32). Certainly, there were some limited examples in the research that were less 'brutal' than the three vignettes, reflecting an ethos that could be seen as closer to 'appreciative enquiry'.¹⁴ However, even these examples tended to be framed in relation to the accountability framework. For example, one head teacher described using peer review to identify and address the 'weaknesses' that she knew existed in her school within the relative privacy of a school to school partnership; however, she acknowledges that this work is still geared towards preparing for more formal monitoring visits and inspections.

Meanwhile, the evidence from Greany's (2018) more recent study of MATs indicates that these corporate school groups are moving away from peer review and towards models that can more rigorously hold school leaders to account for their performance. Greany's research shows that MATs are working in wider ways to develop standardised or aligned approaches to pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, based on a view that this will ensure efficiency and effectiveness. The corporate reviews described above are therefore serving to reinforce these wider processes of alignment and standardisation within MATs. Over time, as MATs come to further dominate the school landscape in England, it seems quite possible that these MAT corporate reviews will largely replace the voluntary peer review models described in this chapter.¹⁵

The final questions that this chapter has raised are less straightforward to answer empirically. Does peer review – and the wider school quality and accountability frameworks that drive it - really lead to the homogenisation of schools? Does having a consistent definition of school quality and a clear accountability framework ultimately support or hinder innovation? Certainly, some argue that adopting a shared definition of 'what makes a good school' across a system is helpful if it allows practitioners to understand where and how their own school needs to improve and if it provides a collective focus and shared language for improvement efforts (Ehren et al, 2015; Ehren et al, 2016; Bruns et al, 2011). From this perspective, homogenisation is to be welcomed – or at least is a price worth paying - if it means that all schools are adopting evidence-based practices and all children are benefitting from a minimum standard of education. In contrast, DiMaggio and Powell argue that homogenisation limits diversity and reduces levels of innovation. This argument chimes with the view, outlined in the Introduction, that many school systems are stuck 'in improvement mode' (Hallgarten, 2015) and are failing to adapt to the changing needs of children and societies. Proponents of this view argue that school systems need to reject "excessively bureaucratic models",

¹⁴ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appreciative_inquiry accessed 22.3.19.

¹⁵ It is notable that several of the national organisations that have promoted peer reviews between schools are now developing MAT-to-MAT peer review models. For example, see: <https://www.challengepartners.org/mat-peer-review> accessed 13.5.19

arguing instead that “more organic metaphors and models might seem messy and unpredictable, but eco-systems and complexity have become the nature of the contemporary world” (OECD, 2015: 17; Greany, in press).

In practice, it seems that some systems are already developing a ‘middle way’ between these two perspectives. Singapore is an example of a system that stopped inspecting its schools altogether some years ago and that has focussed on school-to-school networks as a means of generating and spreading innovation, with considerable evidence of success (Toh et al, 2016). Elsewhere, inspection in the Netherlands is largely focussed at the network level (i.e. the school boards that are equivalent to MATs), rather than at school level, potentially allowing for a more polycentric and less hierarchical approach (Honingh et al, 2018; Janssens and Ehren, 2015).

In conclusion, this chapter has provided original empirical evidence of peer reviews between schools in England. By analysing this evidence through the lens of isomorphism it has sought to provide an original and rigorous analysis, showing how peer review reflects all three isomorphic processes but particularly coercive forms in the context of England’s panoptic accountability regime and quasi-market system. In discussing these findings the chapter raises important questions around the relationships between isomorphism, homogeneity, innovation and improvement in education in the context of hybrid governance. These themes arguably deserve further investigation through research across different international contexts and settings.

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