

Leadership and School Improvement in Multi-Academy Trusts

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Aims:

This chapter aims to:

- Summarize the key features and evolution of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and some of the major issues involved
- Review evidence on school improvement in MATs, focusing on where and how leaders work to develop shared improvement practices across the schools they operate
- Consider the implications of these developments for leadership, including in the context of international evidence and debates.

Introduction

The focus in this chapter is on leadership and improvement in Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) in England, informed by findings from a mixed methods study by the authors (Greany, 2018). More specifically, it focusses on why and how MAT leaders work to develop shared improvement practices across schools.

A MAT is a charitable non-profit company with a board and Chief Executive Officer (CEO), which operates a number of academies via a funding agreement with the Secretary of State for Education (West and Wolfe, 2018). Since their initial development before 2010, the growth of MATs has been rapid, representing a fundamental shift in the organization, structure and operations of England's school system. By March 2020 there were around 1200 MATs operating 7600 academies in total (i.e. more than a third of all schools, and

educating about half of all pupils in England), with each MAT responsible for between two and forty-plus academies, sometimes operating over a wide geographic area. The growth of MATs has largely come through a process of ‘mergers and acquisitions’ between existing state-funded schools (Greany and Higham, 2018) with only a minority of MAT-run academies opened as new (‘free’) schools. Today England has a mixed ‘middle tier’ landscape in which MATs co-exist with Local Authorities (LA) in overseeing schools and academies. There are various differences between MATs and LAs in terms of their structure, capacity and approach to overseeing the work of schools, but the key point to note here relates to school autonomy: an LA maintained school is largely autonomous, with its own governing body, substantive headteacher and budget, whereas an academy within a MAT does not exist as a separate organisation, so the MAT board must decide whether and how to delegate decision-making powers to individual academies.

A key question facing MAT leaders is whether, where and how far to seek integration and alignment of systems, processes and practices across member schools. Most MATs appear to be working to integrate ‘back-office’ functions, such as aspects of finance, procurement and Human Resources, based on a view that this will increase efficiency and effectiveness (Davies et al, 2019). The focus of this chapter is on MAT approaches to the integration of core school improvement related areas, such as pedagogy, curriculum and assessment.

The chapter starts by briefly outlining the development of policy and practice in relation to MATs. We then focus on the evidence from Greany’s (2018) research relating to how different MATs approach the issue of aligning improvement practices across member schools, including through two vignettes. Finally, we briefly consider parallels to MAT developments in other international contexts and conclude by considering some of the

implications of these developments for school leadership and governance in contemporary school systems.

A rapidly developing sector

England has seen a rapid expansion in the proportion of academy schools and MATs, enabled by the passage of the Academies Act in 2010. Academies are funded by national government and have additional 'freedoms' (aka autonomy) compared to LA maintained schools, for example they are not required to follow the National Curriculum or to employ qualified teachers. The government has encouraged higher performing schools to convert voluntarily to academy status, while schools judged 'Inadequate' by Ofsted can be forced to become a sponsored academy within a MAT. By March 2020 more than a third of all primary schools (35%) and more than three quarters of all secondary schools (77%) had become academies.

Academies can operate as stand-alone schools, but the vast majority (84%) are part of a trust of two or more schools. MATs can include both converter and sponsored academies; indeed, it is common for a MAT to be formed by a successful school which converts to academy status and then sponsors (i.e. takes over and runs) one or more other schools that are deemed to be underperforming. In these situations it is common for the headteacher of the original, higher performing, school to become the founding CEO of the MAT. This has required rapid learning and shifting identities for these former headteachers, as they move from a role of positional leadership with hands-on responsibility for pupil learning in a single school, to a strategic role developing a complex – and often fast growing - organization, requiring new entrepreneurial and policy engagement skills (Hughes, 2020; Ehren and Godfrey, 2017).

One of the key challenges of growth in the MAT sector has been that government policy in this area has lacked strategic direction. The first MATs – originally called ‘academy chains’ – were established in the final years of the Labour government as a ‘turnaround’ mechanism to address performance concerns in a small number of urban secondary schools in deprived areas (Hill, 2010, 2012). The Conservative-led Coalition’s 2010 White Paper maintained this niche ‘turnaround’ focus for chains/MATs, while encouraging the majority of schools to become stand-alone academies. However, by 2013 the government had decided that ‘the strongest and best form of collaboration is found in the strong governance of a multi-academy trust’ (HoC, 2013, Ev.55) and by 2016 it was advocating in a White Paper that all schools should join a MAT, arguing that this would increase efficiency and effectiveness (DfE, 2016a). However, the 2016 White Paper proposal was rejected, meaning that MATs have continued to evolve alongside LA-maintained schools and stand-alone academies in a highly diverse and fragmented education system (Greany and Higham, 2018; Richmond, 2019).

Many of the other issues facing the MAT sector can be traced back to this policy incoherence. One issue has been with instances of poor governance, financial mismanagement and even corruption within individual MATs (Thompson, 2020). These issues have played into wider questions about the legitimacy of MATs and academies, particularly given that they are replacing the previous ‘place-based’ oversight of schools by democratically elected LAs. Another issue has been with demonstrating impact: more than a decade after the first MATs started operating, evidence from various studies indicates the sector as a whole is performing no better, and sometimes worse, than the LA-maintained school system (Andrews, 2018; Bernardinelli et al., 2018; DfE, 2018; Andrews and Perera, 2017; Hutchings and Francis, 2017).

Another implication of this evolving policy landscape has been that MATs have emerged in distinct waves, reflecting changing ministerial priorities and concerns and the evolving regulatory framework. Thus, whereas MATs that formed around 2010 tended to be secondary dominated, national in reach and focussed on school turn-around, the MATs that emerged from 2013 onwards were more likely to be locally focussed, with more incremental plans for growth, and with more primaries and converter academies involved. However, as Greany and Higham (2018) show, despite aspirations among these later ‘local solutions’ MATs to develop more equitable and values-based models, they have nevertheless found themselves under pressure to demonstrate impact in line with the accountability framework, which includes the national inspection regime (Ofsted) and performance in standardised tests for pupils at Key Stages 2 and 4 (ages 11 and 16) (See Chapter 3).

A felt pressure to standardize practice across schools

The argument that MATs should seek to standardize practices across member schools has been strongly championed by policy makers. For example, the Department for Education’s (DfE) ‘good practice’ guidance for MATs (2016b: 30) states that ‘effective MATs have taken the opportunity to standardise effective teaching approaches... (which) has proven to be effective in improving pupil outcomes... (and) can also help reduce unnecessary work for teachers’.

This argument has clearly influenced thinking and practice in MATs. For example, one MAT CEO explained that the trust had recently gone through an ‘identity crisis’ because, despite having what he saw as a strong, shared collaborative culture across the trust’s dozen or so schools, it had not seen improvements in pupil exam results at a rate that had been expected (Greany and Higham, 2018: 88). As a result, the CEO felt under pressure to reduce

levels of school autonomy and to standardise practices more consistently across the trust – ‘the most successful [MATs] don’t muck about with thinking about [school] autonomy... It’s plan A, and that’s what everybody does’ (CEO). On this basis he had mandated that all the MAT’s schools must adopt the same exam board in core subject areas (Maths and English). He explained that this would allow for a single ‘MAT mock’ to be run for key year groups across the trust, enabling the MAT’s central team to identify and intervene in schools or departments where progress was a concern.

Overview of findings on sustainable improvement

The research drawn on here (Greany, 2018) sought to assess whether, where and how MAT leaders were working to standardize or align aspects of practice. The research included a national survey of MAT leaders and headteachers as well as twenty-three detailed case studies, which were purposively sampled to reflect a range of performance profiles¹, size (i.e. number of schools), composition (i.e. mix of converter and sponsored academies), phases (primary/secondary) and socio-economic and geographic contexts.

The research identified some common areas which all MATs focus on, albeit to differing degrees and in different ways (see Figure 1). These common areas include the five ‘fundamentals’, which we observed to differing degrees in all the trusts, but which were most apparent in MATs that were undertaking ‘turnaround’ work with newly sponsored ‘under-performing’ schools. In the report we argue that these ‘fundamentals’ are necessary but not sufficient for sustainable improvement at scale, so MATs must focus in parallel on the five strategic areas shown in Figure 18.1.

¹ Using the Department for Education performance tables, which categorise MATs as ‘above average’, ‘average’ or ‘below average’ over a three-year period, based on a number of variables. See:

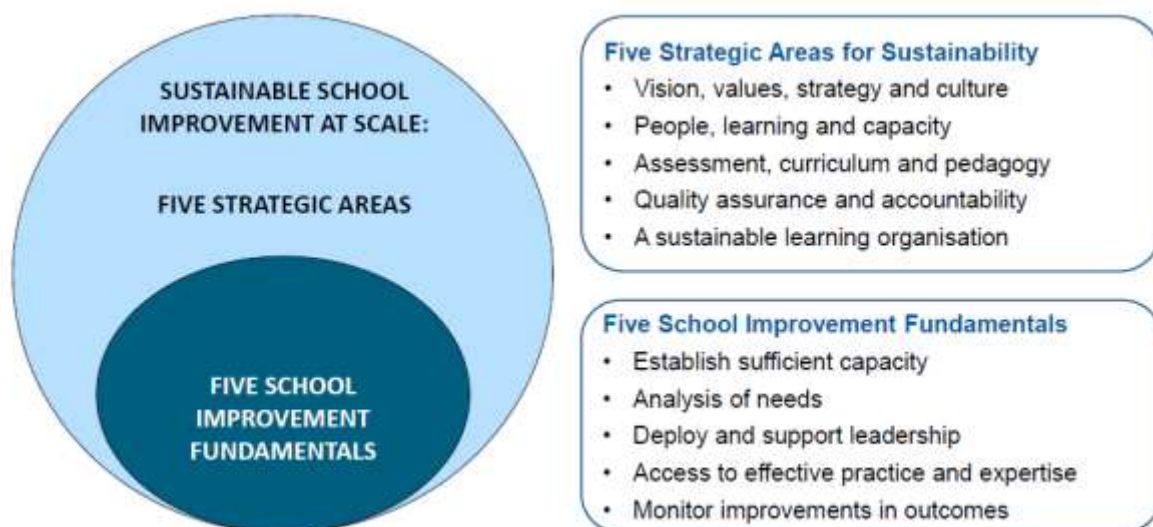


Figure 18.1: Five strategic areas and five school improvement fundamentals (Greany, 2018)

Importantly, the research did not find that particular improvement approaches are consistently adopted by MATs in different performance bands. So, for example, it is not the case that MATs categorised by the DfE as ‘above average’ are all working in similar and distinct ways which might explain their performance. Rather, it appears that wider contextual factors are significant in shaping the way that MATs conceptualise and operationalise their improvement efforts, such as when the MAT was formed, its size and growth model, its context and composition, the phase of its member schools, and the beliefs and values of the MAT’s founding leader(s).

The research did identify a number of distinctive ways in which different MATs approach the five strategic areas shown in Figure 1. For example, in the area of vision and values, we observed two broad approaches. The first group had a relatively narrow, performance driven focus; for example, using Ofsted language to reflect their core mission (e.g. ‘Good or better every day’). The second group was also focused on performance, but

these MATs did this in ways which simultaneously reflected a wider purpose: for some this was a faith-based ethos; others were committed to maintaining a comprehensive intake and not excluding any pupils; still others adhered to a particular pedagogical or curriculum-related philosophy. In the MATs that were committed to a wider purpose, this was important in securing commitment and strengthening motivation among staff.

Two inter-related areas appeared particularly important in shaping a MAT's approach to improvement and the sharing of practice across its member schools.

The first was how it structured its improvement capacity, in terms of how far this was centralized or distributed out to schools. The research focused on the following options and definitions:

- i) Earned autonomy - 'Individual schools are largely autonomous and can decide their own approach, except where performance is poor'
- ii) School-to-school - 'Most of the school improvement activity in our MAT draws on school-to-school support – the central team is small and plays a facilitating role'
- iii) Centralised - 'The central team is the driving force for school improvement in our MAT and is where most of the capacity sits'.

A minority of the twenty-three case study MATs consciously adopted one of these three options, but the majority were developing hybrid combinations of either two or all three.

Among the medium and larger sized MATs there was a convergence of practice, with increasing reliance on larger central teams, along with some use of brokered school to school support and (at least for higher performing schools) some level of earned autonomy. In practice, in a large MAT, this might mean that the headteacher (or, sometimes, the Head of School) would have an Executive Head or Regional Director sitting above them, whose

role was to oversee their work and hold them to account (usually alongside an academy-level governing body or council). In addition, a group of subject and other specialists might be employed in a central office, but be deployed to support those schools that require additional capacity, sometimes augmented by staff or leaders drawn from other schools in the group.

The second area was the decision-making style adopted by the MAT's most senior leaders, particularly the CEO. Three distinct styles were apparent, although more focused research would be required to explore these findings in more depth. The first style was directive; for example, one CEO in a small MAT explained 'if you want to be in our trust, we're the design authority'. The second was paternalistic; for example, leaders in several MATs referred to their schools as a 'family', with themselves clearly positioned as the head who set the culture and made decisions in the schools' best interests. The third was more transparent; in these MATs, leaders would try to involve headteachers and other staff from across the trust in collective decision-making; for example, by agreeing a set of principles for how limited resources might be prioritised so that the most needy schools benefitted most.

Developing standardised, aligned and autonomous approaches

The question of whether, where and how to standardize or align practice across a MAT and where to give schools and teachers the autonomy to make their own decisions was significant but often contentious. Most MAT leaders were concerned that if they imposed standardization it would reduce professional ownership and limit the scope for adaptation to the needs of different schools and contexts. However, at the same time (perhaps influenced by the policy preference for this approach referenced above), they saw benefits

in aligning or even standardizing practices where possible, in the belief that this would ensure that effective practices were shared and applied consistently.

In order to assess these issues, the research focussed on the following definitions:

- Standardized practice – ‘a single required approach that all schools must adopt’
- Aligned practice – ‘an agreed approach that is widely adopted, but on a voluntary basis’
- Autonomous practice – ‘each individual school being able to decide its own approach’.

We found that the vast majority of case study MATs had either standardized or aligned practices in relation to pupil assessment and data reporting. So, for example, all schools in the trust might be expected to submit data on pupil progress in key subject areas on a termly or half-termly basis, based on an agreed assessment system. This data driven approach was seen to give leaders across the group a shared language and way of benchmarking pupil progress and school performance, allowing for more focussed action and support for pupils or schools that required it in order to improve.

In contrast, apart from a small minority, most MATs were not adopting standardized approaches to the curriculum or pedagogical practices, although a number were working to align or standardize practice in some areas. Several of the larger, above average performing MATs were consciously resisting standardization in these areas, arguing that school-level leaders should be given autonomy so that they can work in different ways to address their school’s contextual needs.

The process of aligning or standardizing practices was often challenging for leaders, particularly in MATs where the existing culture had been predicated on high levels of school

autonomy. While a minority of leaders had adopted a 'bullish' approach and were driving through changes, the majority appeared to be working more gradually to try to achieve consensus.

The research identified three approaches to developing shared practices, as follows:

- i) roll-out – first, develop and test the new approach in one school (usually the founding, high performing school); second, codify it and package it up into a defined model; third, implement it across the remaining schools through the use of handbooks, tightly scripted resources and training
- ii) co-design – first, bring key staff together on a regular basis, through subject networks and collaborative development projects; second, identify shared needs and facilitate the development of an agreed approach through a process of sharing and reviewing existing practices and developing and testing new approaches; third, formalise the agreed approach by embedding it into key policies, resources and development programmes
- iii) organic – first, build trust and encourage the sharing of practice by supporting and facilitating subject networks and joint development projects; second, agree and commit to a set of shared principles or values, but allow flexibility over how they are applied in each school; third, continue to encourage the sharing and development of practice and consider the use of regular peer reviews to support convergence over time.

As might be expected, these different strategies were applied in hybrid and, often, evolving ways, in each individual MAT. Nevertheless, certain combinations did appear to be common.

For example, the small number of MATs that were focussed on securing high levels of

standardization across most areas of practice, with low levels of school autonomy, tended to have a relatively narrow, performance driven focus, a directive leadership decision-making style, a more centralised structure and to utilise a roll-out approach to replicating practice.

The following vignettes give a sense of how these approaches were applied in two of the case study trusts. The first, higher-performing trust reflects a more transparent decision-making style, geared towards achieving alignment through collective dialogue and development. The second, lower-performing MAT is more directive, aiming to secure a tight level of standardization, although with some limited scope for innovation.

Vignette 1: Developing an aligned approach to the curriculum in a medium-sized MAT

Senior representatives drawn from across the MAT's schools work together, as members of the Achievement for All Committee, to shape development plans in relation to teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment. A series of Curriculum Groups, for each of the core subjects in secondary and in primary, provide an opportunity for subject leaders to collaborate in their planning and review of curriculum and assessment.

The AfA Committee agreed that across the secondary schools all core subjects would adopt a single exam board to allow for inter-school moderation and the shared development of resources. Open dialogue has resulted in strong ownership of this decision: 'everyone has a voice, the decisions are shaped together and we agree the compromises and own the outcome' (Senior Leader).

As a result of professional dialogue over time, the secondary curriculum structure has become increasingly consistent across schools arising not from prescription but from a

shared understanding of effective models. Where there is variation it is mainly due to the size of school and the consequent range of curriculum options that can be offered. 'As the Trust has grown, we have become more convergent. As professional dialogue between colleagues has expanded and deepened the differences between us have become less visible and the reasons for doing things together has become more evident' (CEO).

Vignette 2: A standardized approach to Teaching and Learning in a large, centralized MAT

The MAT has developed a trust-wide Teaching and Learning policy, which applies across all secondary schools. It consists of the following:

- i. a consistent set of lesson routines that set out expectations for what happens at the start, during and end of every lesson
- ii. a common six-part lesson structure with consistent expectations around learning objectives, differentiated activities, presentation of work and behaviour in lessons
- iii. a collaborative learning approach which is designed to mix up students of different abilities and backgrounds to encourage joint working and develop their social skills
- iv. a common set of resources in every classroom to support learning and an online teacher toolkit available on the white board in every classroom.

In addition, all subject areas are expected to have a clear scheme of learning in place that sets out the teaching units that will be studied at what time, the assessment activities, the teaching objectives and how they will promote literacy and numeracy within their curriculum. The schemes of learning have been developed by Subject Directors often working with subject leads in academies.

The CEO emphasizes that even within a standardized approach there is room for innovation and sharing of good practice. For example, one subject had taken the existing lesson starter model and developed it a stage further to be more differentiated to reflect varied student needs. This has now been adopted by all subjects.

Conclusion

The emergence and development of MATs represents a fundamental shift in the English school landscape. MATs are reversing the trend towards school-based management and school-level autonomy, with profound implications for school leadership. Whereas, before 2010, England had one of the highest levels of school autonomy in the world (OECD, 2012), this is changing rapidly because an academy within a MAT ceases to exist as a stand-alone institution. The MAT's board and central team can choose to delegate decision-making rights to the school level, but these rights can also be removed. As we have seen in this chapter, the headteacher in a MAT is subject to new layers of oversight and will often be encouraged or required to adopt standardized approaches that have been developed centrally.

The implications of these shifts are still emerging and research is only beginning to explore them (see Further Reading). The study drawn on here is significant, because it reveals differences as well as similarities in how MATs work to secure improvement across multiple schools. In particular, it reveals important insights into how different MATs work to share and align practices across schools. At this stage it is not clear whether different approaches to standardization, alignment and autonomy are associated with particular outcomes and impact, but this is an area worthy of further study. The findings also raise further questions, such as how these approaches impact on professional agency among

teachers as well as wider organizational cultures and, critically, how they ultimately influence children's engagement and learning.

Although MATs are unique to England, there are parallel developments in some other countries around the world, such as multi-school boards in the Netherlands (Hooge and Honingh, 2014) and Charter Management Organizations in the US (Farrell, Nayfack and Wohlstetter, 2014; Woodworth et al., 2017). In these systems school-level autonomy and existing forms of local democratic oversight are being reworked through the creation of these new multi-school organizations. These developments raise important wider questions, such as whether and how the new multi-school groups can secure legitimacy in the eyes of different stakeholders, including parents, and what impact they have on local school systems (Glazer, Massell and Malone, 2019).

Summary

This chapter has identified the key features and evolution of MATs in England, and reviewed evidence on school improvement in MATs, focusing on why and how leaders work to develop shared improvement practices across the schools they operate. It has also indicated some implications of these developments for leadership, including in the context of international developments. In order to develop this conceptual and empirical base further research is required, including into the impact of standardized, aligned or autonomous practices on teachers and pupils.

Further reading

Baxter, J. and Floyd, A. (2019) Strategic narrative in multi-academy trusts in England: Principal drivers for expansion. *British Educational Research Journal* 45/5:1050-1071
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Courtney, S. and McGinity, R. (2020) System Leadership as depoliticization: Reconceptualizing 'educational' leadership in an emergent Multi-Academy Trust, *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*