

**School to school collaboration through Teaching School Alliances in England:
'system leadership' in a messy and hybrid governance context**

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Abstract

This chapter explores school-to-school collaboration via Teaching School Alliances (TSAs) in one locality in England, drawing on governance theory (Bevir, 2011) - specifically hierarchy, markets and networks (Tenbensen, 2015). It focuses on three TSAs in detail, describing their individual development as 'school-led' networks, but also how they interact with each other and with other networks in the context of wider hierarchical and market-driven pressures and opportunities. It compares these examples to the three common TSA trajectories described by Greany and Higham (2018) – *exclusive, marketised and hierarchical* – showing how these trajectories overlap and interact in hybrid forms. It concludes by discussing these findings in relation to social regulation and cohesion (Hood, 1991; Chapman, 2019) and to the wider themes in this book. We argue that whilst collaboration between schools in the English system has been driven at the policy level by an egalitarian narrative, in reality such activity is enacted within a hierarchical and individualist framework which can be in tension with the professional values and ethics of school leaders. We conclude with recommendations, which include a need to: rethink of national and local accountability structures in order to encompass a broader range of outcomes; encourage more ambitious levels of experimentation in how the needs of children and families can best be addressed; focus on place-based coherence and collaboration; and, finally, develop the skills and capacity of front-line leaders to shape productive networks.

Keywords: school-to-school collaboration; partnership; leadership; governance; networks; Teaching School Alliances

Introduction

This chapter explores school-to-school collaboration via Teaching School Alliances (TSAs) in one locality in England, drawing on governance theory (Bevir, 2011) - specifically hierarchy, markets and networks (Tenbenschel, 2015). It focuses on three TSAs in detail, describing their individual development as 'school-led' networks, but also how they interact with each other and with other networks in the context of wider hierarchical and market-driven pressures and opportunities. It compares these examples to the three common TSA trajectories described by Greany and Higham (2018) – *exclusive, marketised and hierarchical* – showing how these trajectories overlap and interact in hybrid forms. It concludes by discussing these findings in relation to social regulation and cohesion (Hood, 1991; Chapman, 2019) and to the wider themes at the heart of this book. We argue that whilst collaboration between schools in the English system has been driven at the policy level by an egalitarian narrative, in reality such activity is enacted within a hierarchical and individualist framework which can be in tension with the professional values and ethics of school leaders. This has implications for policy and practice, so we conclude with a set of recommendations.

Three trajectories for Teaching Schools in the 'self-improving school-led system'

The idea of a 'self-improving, school-led school system' (SISS) has been an overarching narrative for the government's schools policy in England since 2010. The associated reforms have been far-reaching, but have included new, more demanding, curriculum standards and school accountability requirements. The structure of the school system has changed radically, through an expansion in the number of academy schools and Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and a parallel reduction in the role of England's 152 Local Authorities (LAs). Academies are funded and overseen by central, rather than local, government and have additional 'freedoms' (for example, they are not required to follow the National Curriculum) (West and Wolfe, 2018; Greany, 2018a; Greany and McGinity, 2020). The government has argued that these reforms aim to 'dismantle the apparatus of central control and bureaucratic compliance' (DfE 2010: 66) by 'moving control to the frontline' (DfE 2016: 8).

Policy has also encouraged schools to collaborate (Armstrong, Brown and Chapman, 2020), often by encouraging high-performing schools and 'system leaders' to support schools that are judged to be under-performing, but also through the broader Teaching Schools initiative outlined here. School partnerships have been viewed by government as 'an essential requirement' (HoC, 2013: Ev46, para 3) for realising its SISS vision and it has supported their development through various initiatives, particularly TSAs (DfE, 2010).¹ Between 2010 and 2019, a school could volunteer to be designated as a Teaching School by the government if it met specified performance criteria – for example in terms of its Ofsted² inspection grade and pupil performance in standardized tests. Designation brought some limited core funding and a remit to provide Initial Teacher Training (ITT), school-to-school support for schools facing challenges, and ongoing professional and leadership development for staff across its network.³ In order to fulfil this remit, the Teaching School was required to form an Alliance of partner schools, though the precise size and nature of this network was not prescribed. From the outset,

¹ The first cohort of Teaching Schools were designated and began work in 2011, with 750 in operation by 2019. In 2019, after the data for this chapter had been collected, the government announced that Teaching Schools would be replaced by a smaller number of Teaching School Hubs. The Hubs began operating nationally in 2021 - see <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/teaching-school-hubs> accessed 27.8.21.

² Ofsted stands for the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. It is a non-ministerial department that inspects and regulates services that provide education and skills for learners of all ages (GOV.UK, 2021a)

³ Teaching Schools were initially expected to work across six areas, but these were merged into three in 2015.

Teaching Schools were expected to generate their own income, by selling services to other schools (DfE, 2010), but they could also bid for a variety of central grants to support a range of different policy priorities, such as supporting other schools with the implementation of government curriculum and assessment reforms. A particular government priority in this period was to expand the role of schools in ITT (and to reduce the role of universities), so Teaching Schools were required to develop provision in this area as a priority (Greany and Brown, 2015).

In summary, then, Teaching Schools were expected to: i) support the enactment of government policies and priorities; ii) foster the development of a commercial marketplace for school improvement related services; iii) promote lateral networks between schools as a means of securing systemic improvement.

These three roles neatly traverse the three coordinating mechanisms identified by governance theory (Rhodes, 1997; Bevir, 2011; Tenbenschel, 2015), which Greany and Higham (2018) define as follows:

- *Hierarchy* – the authority exercised by national, regional and local government as well as formally governed school groups, through policies, guidance, bureaucratic oversight, accountability and support
- *Markets* – incentives and (de)regulation which encourage choice, competition and commercialisation
- *Networks* – the (re)creation of interdependencies that support and/or coerce inter-organisational collaboration.

Each mechanism is seen to have strengths but also limitations. For example, Adler (2001) notes how: hierarchy draws on formal authority to enable control, but this can weaken collaboration and lateral innovation; markets rely on price to co-ordinate supply and demand and promote flexibility, but this can corrode trust, knowledge sharing and equity; while networks co-ordinate on the basis of trust and promote knowledge sharing, but can become dysfunctional, complacent and/or exclusive. Critically, government attempts to mix and match these mechanisms, through 'meta-governance', are not straightforward and can lead to messiness and governance failure (Ball and Junemann 2012). In addition, this mixing of hierarchy, markets and networks by the state can create tensions, contradictions and confusion, which can be experienced as 'personal, professional or ethical dilemmas' (Newman and Clarke 2009: 127) by leaders in front-line contexts. We return to these points in the conclusion, where we assess how the mixing of hierarchy, markets and networks in the core remit of TSAs has created challenges and tensions for TSA leaders.

Gu *et al's* (2015) government-funded evaluation of Teaching Schools found that they were clustered in urban areas and concentrated among secondary schools. The evaluators concluded that TSAs could be conceived as 'loose partnerships' that rely on 'like-minded people' working together through a process of 'give and take' to develop collective and collaborative intellectual and social capital for improvement (2015: 180). Greany and Higham agreed that 'the relatively non-prescriptive and voluntary nature of the Teaching Schools initiative left scope for local adaptation and variation' (2018:79). However, they argued that Gu *et al's* interpretation was a 'somewhat idealized view' (2018:79), not least because Teaching Schools were also working to generate income and to enact government policy. Based on their study of four localities across England, Greany and Higham identified three common development trajectories for TSAs, arguing that in:

- *hierarchical alliances*, one or more lead school dominated developments and was seen by alliance members to be benefitting disproportionately;
- *marketised alliances*, the lead school/s sold services in a transparent but transactional way, with limited commitment to ongoing partnership or reciprocity with ‘client’ schools; and
- *exclusive alliances*, a subset of higher performing schools had formed the network as a way of securing their own performance, providing relatively limited opportunities or support for schools more widely to engage.

This chapter builds on Greany and Higham’s analysis, showing how these trajectories develop in hybrid ways as leaders respond to different, often competing, opportunities and requirements, and as they seek to align these with their personal and professional values. It draws on previously unpublished data from the earlier study, focusing in detail on one of the four localities studied – Eastern City. The research in Eastern City⁴ involved visits and interviews in three established Teaching Schools as well as a fourth school that was in the process of applying to become one. In addition, a range of staff in seven other schools across the city were interviewed along with a number of ‘system informants’, such as Local Authority (LA) and Ofsted (regional) leaders and the Regional Schools Commissioner.⁵

Existing networks as a foundation for many TSAs

Greany and Higham’s research identified that partnerships have become more extensive and more important to schools since 2010. School leaders argued that collaboration was ‘more and more something we *need* to do’ (primary head). This view reflected a mix of factors, but particularly the loss of support from LAs coupled with a need for schools to respond to rapid changes in the curriculum and assessment regime and to meet the changing demands of the accountability system. Networking was also seen to provide mutual support and professional development opportunities for school leaders and staff and to offer access to expertise and additional improvement capacity for schools that required it.

Greany and Higham found that collaborative activity between schools took many forms, but that the ‘local school cluster’ was the most common form of partnership, especially among primary schools. These local clusters ranged widely, but the strongest examples were usually long-standing, with formalised governance and involvement from staff at multiple levels in a range of improvement-focussed activities. Secondary schools tended to collaborate in different ways, reflecting higher levels of local competition, although this did not necessarily prevent them from co-operating locally.

Many of the TSAs operating across the four localities studied by Greany and Higham had grown out of an existing local cluster. SUCCESS TSA, outlined below (Box A), is one example of this kind of cluster development. However, as the SUCCESS vignette indicates, such transitions were rarely seamless. Indeed, Greany and Higham show how the decision to engage with a government-funded initiative of this sort inevitably required changes to existing cluster arrangements and ways of working. One example relates to network governance, where clusters were required to move from relatively egalitarian and informal headteacher steering groups, to a model in which one school – the designated

⁴ See Greany and Higham (2018) for a detailed methodology and for further details on Eastern City, which is a pseudonym.

⁵ There are eight Regional School Commissioners that work across England. Broadly speaking, their remit is to work with existing academies and MATs in their region to address underperformance and ensure they are supported to improve (GOV.UK, 2021b).

Teaching School – became the *primus inter pares*. These changes led to wider shifts in how schools engaged with and perceived these networks, some of which could be seen as positive (for example, enabled by increased network-level staffing capacity), while others were more problematic (for example, if the lead school was seen to be benefitting disproportionately). Evaluations of previous government-led initiatives that required schools to work with and support other schools has typically revealed similar opportunities and barriers (see Armstrong and Ainscow, 2018)

Three TSAs in Eastern City

Eastern City has a population of around half a million and is served by about 200 schools and academies in total. The city has above average levels of poverty and ethnic diversity, but with significant differences between different parts of the city.

All of the wider case study schools visited in Eastern City (i.e. the non-Teaching Schools) had engaged with one or more Teaching School to support their work, though not necessarily one of the Teaching Schools we focus on here. The nature and extent of this engagement varied. At one end of the spectrum was the primary principal quoted in Box A, below, who had been closely involved in the development of SUCCESS TSA: even though his school was not the designated Teaching School, it had agreed to take a lead responsibility for delivering some aspects of the overall remit. Most other case study schools had much lower levels of engagement with Teaching Schools, and had more transactional relationships with these schools. For example, most had bought in specific expertise and/or had participated in Teaching School-run professional development programmes and events. Nevertheless, perceptions of this support were broadly positive, as the following quote indicates:

The LA has gone from 30 advisors to 3, so getting the person you need, when you need them, is now nearly impossible.... [So last year] I went and bought time in from the City TSA, which was excellent, and cheaper than the LA now.

Principal, maintained primary school, Ofsted Good

In Boxes A, B and C we provide vignettes of three established Teaching Schools visited in Eastern City. The first, SUCCESS TSA, offers a clear example of an *exclusive* alliance, as defined by Greany and Higham, but the second and third examples are less clear-cut. Coherence TSA (Box B) is seeking to achieve scale and sustainability by forming meta-alliances with other TSAs and with the City Primary Heads group, an approach that could be characterized as combining the *hierarchical* and *marketised* trajectories in hybrid form. However, these efforts are only partially successful and achieved limited benefit for the Executive Head or her Teaching School, whilst generating significant additional work and pressure for her and her team. Indeed, the fact that the Executive Head continues to work to build a collaborative city-wide approach, in contrast to Principal of Reluctant TSA (who decides that the additional work and risks are not worthwhile), indicates a more values-driven motivation than the *hierarchical* and *marketised* trajectories might suggest. Similarly, while Regional MAT TSA (Box C) is clearly part of a *hierarchical* MAT structure which requires a largely *exclusive* focus on turning round the challenging schools within the trust, the approach is nonetheless motivated by an underlying set of values which center on improving the quality of education in deprived communities. We discuss the implications of these complex and overlapping operational models and professional and individual logics in the final section.

Box A: SUCCESS TSA

The principal of a primary school in a small town on the outskirts of Eastern City explained that collaboration had become increasingly essential for school improvement as support from the LA declined after 2010. This meant ‘we had to sort our own houses out, really’.

However, he felt that the local cluster, which had historically included 12 local primary schools, had failed to recognise the implications of this shift. The main sticking point was when six of the primary school heads proposed developing a model of peer review, which would involve visiting each others’ schools. The other six primaries resisted this proposal, but the proposing group decided to do it anyway:

Literally, as soon as we mentioned doing inspections (i.e. peer reviews) 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.

Principal, primary maintained, Ofsted Good

One of the schools in the group had subsequently been designated as a Teaching School, with the other five schools taking the role of strategic partners in the SUCCESS Alliance. The peer reviews had been operating for two years at the time of the case study visit and were seen by the participating heads as an important way of sharing ideas and expertise between the schools and of ensuring that they did not become ‘complacent’, for example in preparing for an Ofsted inspection (Greany, 2020). The schools had also developed a range of wider partnership activities, including: a common approach to assessing pupil progress; a school business managers group which undertakes some joint procurement; a range of self-initiated subject networks; a middle leaders development programme and some other joint professional development for staff.

However, the principal acknowledged that the development of SUCCESS as a separate entity from the wider cluster had led to a division between what he described as the ‘stronger’ and ‘more vulnerable’ schools in the locality. He explained that ‘there’s a lot more suspicion than there has been in the past. The temperature drops by about 30 degrees as soon as you mention SUCCESS’. The Deputy head explained that whereas, previously, there had been cluster-wide training days, that year there had been only a SUCCESS training day, which only the member schools could attend. In the words of the principal:

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.

Principal, primary maintained, Ofsted Good

This principal admitted to feeling deeply conflicted by this development, but argued 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.

Principal, primary maintained, Ofsted Good

Box B: Coherence TSA

Coherence TSA had formed about two years before the case study visit, led by a designated primary school. Unlike many alliances, this network had not grown out of a local cluster. Indeed, the Deputy Head of the Teaching School explained that attempts to establish local cluster working in the past had proved frustrating, which he put down to local competition between schools. In his view, the Teaching School model was more effective as it was focused on addressing real needs, rather than 'geographical for geographical's sake'.

The Executive Head of the primary school was leading the new Alliance, often drawing on his own school's staff for capacity and expertise. For example, an experienced maths teacher in the school had been released from class teaching completely, spending half her time supporting other teachers within the school and the other half supporting schools across the wider alliance. In the year of the case study visit, she had worked most closely with an Ofsted 'good' primary school, leading two whole school training days and 12 additional staff meetings, all focused on deepening subject knowledge. She was also working with the school's maths subject leader to embed this work. Meanwhile, she was trying to ensure that her work reached as many primary schools across the city as possible. For example, she had distributed a monthly maths newsletter to schools, working hard to grow her network so that she reached around 85% of all the maths subject leaders across the city.

The key challenge facing Coherence TSA's Executive Head was how to develop a more sustainable model for the Alliance. He was concerned that if he and his staff spent too much time supporting other schools across the city, then the performance of the designated Teaching School itself might suffer (which could lead to the school being de-designated). However, the core government funding for the Teaching School was insufficient to employ a dedicated team, so he was cautious about employing additional staff unless he could be sure how to pay them. Income from one-off government grants for specific pieces of work had proved volatile and hard to predict. The alternative was to generate income by selling services, such as professional development

programmes, to other schools, but the challenge there was that he would be in competition with the LA and with other Teaching Schools.

The Executive Head's response was to try to build a series of meta-alliances, with the LA and with other TSAs and groups across the city, arguing the need for a coherent, city-wide approach which could meet the needs of all schools. In practice, this approach had had mixed success, partly due to a perception among some colleague heads that he was 'empire building'. Approaches to two existing partnerships in different parts of the city were rebuffed. He approached a third group of primary schools when he heard that they were applying to become a TSA, persuading them to work with his Alliance on a city-wide model. The new bid was successful, bringing in additional funding and capacity, which had enabled the Executive Head to appoint a full-time TSA Manager. However, the principal of the new Teaching School – Reluctant TSA - quickly became concerned by the amount of work involved, fearing that his own school was becoming over-stretched and might decline, so had decided to pull back and focus primarily on his own school.

A further attempt to create coherence had also encountered resistance. The Executive Head sat on the City Primary Heads Group (CPHG), an umbrella group for all primary heads. His vision was that the TSA and CPHG should be linked, with a single subscription covering membership of both groups, but he had not been able to persuade the Chair of CPHG to support this proposal.

The Executive Head's final partnership effort, with Regional MAT TSA on the Maths Hub, was challenging for different reasons, as we explore in the following section.

Box C: Regional MAT TSA

Regional MAT (Multi-Academy Trust)⁶ had emerged, prior to 2010, from a single, high-performing secondary school that had taken on responsibility for turning around two of the lowest-performing schools in Eastern City. In the years immediately after 2010 the MAT grew to include 12 schools, half in Eastern City and half across the wider region. The MAT's growth had required a rapid evolution in strategy, not least because the newly joining schools were all in deprived contexts and all required intensive 'turnaround' improvement, which stretched the Trust's limited central capacity.⁷

The creation of Regional MAT TSA was an important step towards increasing the Trust's capacity to manage this 'turnaround' work. The TSA Director, working with a small central team, took on responsibility for coordinating 'school to school support' efforts across the MAT's network of schools and for providing initial teacher training, professional development programmes, subject networks, and a programme of peer reviews between MAT schools.

The TSA's Director was clear that coordinating school-to-school support activities – for example, by seconding staff from higher performing schools in the trust to work in the most challenging, newly joined schools - was his priority. Moving staff around in this way was arguably more feasible for him than for the other TSAs (i.e. because the MAT was the single employer of all staff across the group, whereas in non-MAT Alliances each individual school was the employer). Nevertheless, the TSA Director was dismissive of other TSAs in the city, who he argued had prioritised the easier and more lucrative aspects of their remit - 'the nicer things' - such as professional and leadership development. He argued that school-to-school support should be the core role, even though it is 'the hardest to do', because – in his view - it makes the most direct impact on school improvement.

The focus on intensive turnaround work with schools within the MAT meant that Regional MAT TSA was seen by many other interviewees across Eastern City as internally focused. One interviewee described it as a 'black hole that sucks everything in'. The TSA Director did argue that 'it's about not being insular' and gave examples of working with schools beyond the MAT, but was also clear that he worked for the MAT and was answerable to the MAT's board and CEO, who evaluated his performance.

Finally, Regional MAT TSA was also distinctive in the extent to which it saw itself as a business, meaning that any external work needed to generate income. As the TSA Director put it:

⁶ A MAT is a non-profit company, with a board and Chief Executive, which operates a number of academies (Greany, 2018a; Greany and McGinity, 2020).

⁷ See Glazer et al (in progress) for a detailed exploration of the MAT's growth challenges and how it responded.

We are a big business. Don't get me wrong. In terms of commercial work... So, you need to think about how you're going to generate income through work that you do for other schools that is going to make you sustainable into the future.

Mandated collaboration as a source of tension between TSAs

The nature of inter-TSA collaboration in Eastern City was illuminated further through the development of a government-funded Maths Hub.

Maths Hubs were a government initiative coordinated by a dedicated agency.⁸ Hubs received generous funding and were charged with introducing a new pedagogical approach to mathematics teaching in primary schools, modelled on practice in Shanghai and the concept of 'maths mastery' (Boylan et al., 2019). Regional MAT TSA and Coherence TSA both applied to become hubs, but only Regional MAT TSA was successful. However, the government insisted that Regional MAT TSA work with Coherence TSA on the implementation. Working in partnership together in this 'forced marriage' proved challenging because it revealed stark differences in the ethos and approach of the two TSAs: while Regional MAT TSA wanted to focus initially on its own MAT primary schools, Coherence TSA wanted to focus more widely, to reach all primary schools across the city.

The Mathematics Leader in Coherence TSA described the early stage of the partnership as a 'really horrible period, (with) nasty emails flying back and forth about lack of partnership working.' In their view, the issue was that the two TSAs 'had a completely different view of CPD (Continuous Professional Development) and teaching schools'. They characterized these differences as follows:

Their [i.e. Regional MAT TSA] interpretation of Teaching Schools is - you come and join our trust and we will support you in a really incredible way to turn your failing school around and we're keeping it in this lovely cosy group of 12 schools - and they do nothing to support other schools. And they probably shouldn't need to as they have such an impact on the schools they have.... whereas we have a totally different model which is about bits of support here and there and all about going out to other schools... One model is not better than the other, they're just different, but that difference in models caused a really horrible year both for them and for us. It's taken a lot of hard work and goodwill on both sides to get where we are now where there's some common ground.

(Mathematics Lead Teacher, Coherence TSA)

The Director of Regional MAT TSA acknowledged these difficulties – 'we've normed, formed, stormed, and all of that' – but argued that, ultimately, bringing the two TSAs together had enhanced the overall approach. Having used the Hub funding and resources to develop expertise within its own schools, Regional MAT TSA hoped that these schools could become beacons of good practice for schools across

⁸ The National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics (NCETM) coordinates the work of 40 Maths Hubs across England. See <https://www.ncetm.org.uk/> accessed 1.9.21

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the wider city to learn from. More recently, the two TSAs had agreed to consider how other TSAs across the city could develop knowledge of the new approaches so that this knowledge could be disseminated and embedded before the Maths Hub funding elapsed.

This brief example adds further depth to the assessment of Coherence and Regional MAT TSAs. It clearly supports an assessment of Regional MAT TSA as *exclusive* in its focus on using the resources to benefit its own schools before any consideration of how the additional funding might benefit schools more widely. But this *exclusivity* can also be rationalized in terms of equity: in the eyes of Regional MAT's leaders, the children in these deprived and under-performing schools deserve additional resources and attention, so this justifies their decision to focus on these schools initially. By the same token, Coherence TSA rationalizes its own focus on ensuring that all schools across the city can access the new pedagogy and resources in terms of equity and fairness, arguing that all schools and all children should benefit equally. We suggest above that Coherence TSA could be characterized as combining the *hierarchical* and *marketised* trajectories in hybrid form, but the example of the Maths Hub work adds further nuance to this assessment, revealing the extent to which these apparently 'selfish' motives are bound up with personal and professional logics and values relating to equity, fairness and profession-led improvement. As the quotes above indicate, the resulting tensions can cause significant inter and intra-personal conflict for the leaders and teachers involved.

In addition, we argue that the Maths Hub example reveals important and still unresolved differences of opinion around how knowledge and expertise can best be developed and disseminated across local school systems. Is it better to have an intensive focus on developing innovative approaches in a small number of schools, and to then use these schools as exemplars for others to learn from (i.e. the Regional MAT TSA model), or is it better to share resources and encourage adoption across a wider network, in the hopes that new practices will emerge and spread more organically (i.e. the Coherence TSA model)? These issues are beyond the immediate scope of this chapter, but we argue that they merit further investigation.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this chapter reveals the (often competing) demands that 'system leader' schools and leaders in England face. They are clearly situated within, and responding to, hierarchical, market, and network incentives and pressures. They must work simultaneously to: i) address the priorities and expectations set by government, ii) secure sufficient income to remain sustainable, and iii) meet the needs and expectations of their alliance members. In addition, they must continue to run their own schools, maintaining high levels of performance, not least in order to retain their Teaching School designation.

We argue above that where governments engage in meta-governance, by seeking to mix hierarchical, market and network forms of co-ordination to achieve desired outcomes, this can lead to messiness and governance failure and can create tensions and dilemmas for front-line leaders. We see both outcomes here. For example, the schooling landscape across Eastern City is undoubtedly messier as a result of the roll-back of the LA and the emergence of new school types and support structures, including MATs and TSAs. It can also be argued that having multiple Teaching Schools across the

locality, with each one interpreting its remit in different ways and adopting a different strategy for network improvement, increases the likelihood of governance failure. One example of this is the wasted time and energy expended on agreeing the Maths Hub approach. Equally, we see how these issues can cause tensions and ethical dilemmas for these 'system leaders' and their colleagues. For example, the headteacher involved with SUCCESS TSA clearly feels discomfort at having to take the 'pragmatic, yet morally dubious position of 'I want to be with the winners.'" These issues also have important implications for equity, for example for the six cluster schools who are excluded from the SUCCESS TSA partnership, or the many schools that must wait for support in implementing Maths Mastery.

Greany and Higham (2018) conclude that school 'system leaders', such as the headteachers of TSAs, form part of a 'co-opted elite', who work as part of the managerial state and accrue a range of personal and organizational benefits as a result. At one level this chapter reinforces that conclusion, showing how Teaching School leaders become the *primus inter pares* in previously equitable clusters and partnerships, in return for implementing government policy. Equally, it adds nuance, by highlighting the extent to which these leaders work – in different ways – to enhance equity and outcomes in line with their individual and collective values. Interestingly, one TSA headteacher in Eastern City argued that, far from increasing her power and elite status, the task of leading across an alliance had actually revealed the limited nature of her authority:

I think there's a difficulty in trying to help a school-led system where you don't know where the leadership of the school-led system is; I think that's really hard. Because I don't really know where it's supposed to sit. It sits with us, is what we keep being told, but I've got no authority over other principals in the city and they can either listen to me or not, it's up to them.

Executive Head, maintained primary federation, Ofsted Outstanding

Finally, we have explored the three TSA trajectories outlined by Greany and Higham (2018) - *exclusive, marketised and hierarchical* – showing how these can be applied in hybrid ways in response to hierarchical, market and network imperatives. More importantly, we have sought to show how these apparently 'selfish' strategies can be inter-mixed with values-driven approaches which reflect a commitment to equity and systemic improvement, even when such aims might be at odds with the needs and priorities of the designated Teaching School.

Key implications for policy and practice

The data we present through these case studies are illustrative of the complex and turbulent waters that leaders of Teaching Schools and their partners must navigate. Drawing on Hood's model, the data reveals a hybrid approach to collaboration in which school 'system leaders' may be driven by an egalitarian narrative and set of personal values, but this can be in tension with the hierarchical and individualist ways of working that are incentivized by the broader governance and accountability structures in which they operate. As we argue above, these pressures encourage 'selfish' behaviours whilst increasing the risk of governance and operational failures and of increasing inequality between schools.

Although we see this critique of the Teaching Schools policy and its outcomes as entirely valid, we also recognise its strengths. For example, we note above that perceptions of Teaching Schools among the wider schools we visited were broadly positive. We also recognise that alternative models – including the LA-led model for school improvement in place before 2010 and the MAT-led model that the government now hopes to achieve (Whittaker, 2021) – are not panaceas. The original aspiration for a system in which schools work together and support one another to collectively improve the educational achievement and life chances of children and young people had many strengths, and our findings do include examples of where such networked improvement has added value. The challenge, as we see it, is to address the governance issues so that school-to-school collaboration can develop within a wider context that secures equity and improvement. To this end, we put forward the following recommendations:

1. Purposeful collaboration between schools can be a powerful vehicle for knowledge exchange, innovation and educational improvement. However, genuine collaboration based on shared values and trust takes time to build and requires sophisticated leadership. The outcomes from such collaboration might include measurable improvements in defined areas, such as school quality and/or pupil achievement, but a narrow focus on these areas can stifle the potential for wider benefits and outcomes. Holding individual schools accountable for performance, with ‘high stakes’ consequences for ‘failure’, makes collaboration less likely. Similarly, market incentives which seek to encourage inter-school competition for pupils and/or resources, will make collaboration more difficult. We advocate for a fundamental rethink of national and local accountability structures in order to encompass a broader range of outcomes, including both school and network level outcomes, and to encourage more ambitious levels of experimentation in how the needs of children and families can best be addressed.
2. Local school systems in England are now remarkably complex and fragmented, with serious implications for equity and sustainable, strategic improvement. There is a need to focus on place-based coherence and collaboration, between schools, academies, MATs and the various other ‘middle tier’ groups that exist, including LAs and the new Teaching School Hubs. School ‘system leaders’ can play a role in helping to shape such local coherence, but they will need to be convened within a common framework that recognises and addresses existing power imbalances and that places equity at the heart of any new approach.
3. Simply incentivising schools to collaborate, through designations and funding as seen in the Teaching Schools model, is unlikely to work. Rather, schools should be carefully and contextually matched so that they can provide mutual challenge and critical friendship informed by evidence as to their strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, there is a need to invest in the skills and capacity of school leaders to undertake such net-work, for example as seen in the Kāhui Ako | Communities of Learning programme in New Zealand (Greany and Kamp, 2022).

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