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The Paradox of Autonomy:
the journey of three
standalone schools into a
multi-academy trust.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
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DECLARATION AND WORD COUNT

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the paradox of autonomy through the journeys of three standalone schools: one maintained, one foundation and one academy towards forming a multi-academy trust. By examining the motivations and drivers of Governors and Senior Leaders in each school, it seeks to understand why, and how, decisions are made and the impact of these upon the present and the future. By concentrating on three key transition points: the start of the journey, the point of conversion and twelve months later, it explores the challenges and opportunities that arise throughout the conversion process, identifying those factors that both facilitate and hinder successful transition into a multi-academy trust.

The research draws upon the reflections of Governors and Senior Leaders, as well as the influence of school context, and national and local pressures, on choices and decisions made. Through a conceptual framework of key themes, and by using qualitative methodology, it explores whether the original catalysts and impetus for conversion are realised, and whether the multi-academy trust model enables or constrains autonomy.

This research project finds that, contrary to popular perception, the majority of issues surface not prior to conversion, but afterwards, with the multi-academy trust structure limiting opportunities to innovate and change. Whilst future governance structures assume a high priority during conversion, less attention is paid to the structures and powers of the centralised function in a MAT. This can then lead to role ambiguity and conflict, with the complexity of the conversion process detracting from the bigger picture post-transition. This study finds that, paradoxically, the most popular reasons for conversion: enhanced autonomy and increased funding are hindered by the very structures intended to promote them. As a result, schools within multi-academy trusts can find themselves with less freedom than in a local-authority led system. This research project also finds that the status of the converting school is less significant than the motivations and prior experiences of those its stakeholders working within them, and that

school improvement activities and professional development opportunities are enhanced by schools joining together within a multi-academy trust.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

5A*CEM	5 GCSEs including English and Maths at Grade A*-C
ASCL	Association of School and College Leaders
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BoD	Board of Directors
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFO	Chief Financial Officer
CMO	Charter Management Organisation
CTC	City Technology College
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DfE	Department for Education (1992-1995 and 2010-present)
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment (1995-2001)
DfES	Department for Education and Skills (2001-2007)
EPI	Education Policy Institute
ERA	Education Reform Act (1988)
ESFA	Education and Skills Funding Agency
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FSM	Free School Meals
GAG	General Annual Grant
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GM	Grant-Maintained
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspector
HTB	Headteacher Board
HofC	House of Commons
HofCESC	House of Commons Education Select Committee
HofCPAC	House of Commons Public Accounts Committee
IDACI	Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index

KS1	Key Stage 1
KS2	Key Stage 2
KS3	Key Stage 3
KS4	Key Stage 4
LA	Local Authority
LACSEG	Local Authority Central Spend Equivalent Grant
LEA	Local Education Authority
LGA	Local Government Association
LGB	Local Governing Body
LMS	Local Management of Schools
MAT	Multi-Academy Trust
NAO	National Audit Office
NCSL	National College for School Leadership
NCTL	National College for Teaching and Leadership
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
NGA	National Governors' Association
NSN	New Schools Network
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PSE	Public Sector Executive
PwC	PricewaterhouseCoopers
QTS	Qualified Teacher Status
RSC	Regional Schools Commissioner
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SSAT	Specialist Schools and Academies Trust
TALIS	The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey
TUPE	Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment)

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Setting the Scene: Background and Context

The development of academies and multi-academy trusts (MATs) has arguably been the educational story of the last decade in England. Operating as state funded independent schools, academies are outside of local authority control with funding provided directly by central government. Whilst social historians may point to the 1988 Educational Reform Act (ERA, 1988), and the subsequent introduction of City Technology Colleges (CTCs), as the forerunners of the academies' programme, it was the Academies Act (2010) that catalysed the education sector and fundamentally changed how state education was provided and delivered. As the first piece of legislation introduced by the Coalition government in 2010, the Academies Act allowed all schools the opportunity to sever their ties with local educational authorities and become self-governing. According to the New Schools Network (NSN):

*Academies are publically funded independent schools held accountable through a legally binding 'funding agreement'. These schools have more freedom and control over curriculum design, school hours and term dates, and staff pay and conditions.
(NSN; 2015:3)*

There are three types of academies. Sponsored academies are those supported by a private sponsor such as a business, university or faith group. The sponsor oversees educational and financial performance and works alongside the leadership team in the running of the school. Sponsored academies were traditionally located in areas of social deprivation, with a long history of educational underachievement, but are now much more commonplace, although still primarily situated within inner cities. Converter Academies are schools judged as either 'outstanding' or 'good' by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). These are a new category of school, introduced by the Academies Act (2010), and do not have a sponsor, instead setting up their own academy trust to manage affairs.

The picture is further complicated by the introduction of a third category of academy - Free Schools. Free schools are newly established schools located within areas of demographic growth or educational under-achievement. They are established by existing academy trusts, with sponsorship accreditation, or by interested parental, community or religious groups. Prior to opening, free schools have to demonstrate a local need for such provision, adequate pupil numbers to make the school financially viable, and a commitment to high standards and expectations. Heilbronn (2016:1) observes that, 'Historically, governance of schools was a partnership between government, locally elected education authorities (LEAs), teachers in schools, and the churches, which owned many of the schools' but as West and Bailey (2013:137) note, 'The outcome of these policy shifts has been that providers of school-based education are more varied, the role of locally-elected public bodies has changed, if not diminished, and the role of private providers dependent on state monies has increased.' As a result, the provision, structure, organisation and governance of education in England looks completely different in 2019 to how it did in 2009.

This situation is not unique to England. As Keddie (2015:2) notes, 'Across the western world, education systems are being transformed by the policy moves of autonomy and accountability.' Pollitt (2007:529) coined the term 'redisorganisation' to denote the serial restructuring of public services across many countries, with Lubienski (2014:425) commenting on, 'efforts to undercut the perceived power of intermediate or meso-level governance structures' in England, the USA and New Zealand. What, perhaps, has been unique to the English context, however, is the speed and pace of change; le Roux (2014) bemoaning the absence of a codified constitution in the United Kingdom and claiming, 'As a result, the executive is able to rearrange the architecture of the state at will, irrespective of the views of other state institutions, and at short notice.' (le Roux, 2014:4)

From representing less than 1% of schools in 2009, by 2019, 74% of all secondary schools and 31% of primary schools had become academies. Of

these, 82% were in MATs. Roberts and Danechi (2019:4), in a publication for the House of Commons, offer the following definition, 'Multi-Academy Trusts, or MATs, usually run more than one academy. MATs themselves are single legal entities, with one set of trustees. Their member schools operate under a single governance structure.' The House of Commons Education Select Committee (HofCESC; 2017:4) observes that, 'As the academies programme has developed since 2010, the government has promoted MATs as a structure to support academies to collaborate and expand' and, since 2016, schools have been encouraged to become academies only as part of a MAT. Greany and Higham (2018:85) argue that the development of MATs should be understood in terms of mergers and acquisitions rather than partnerships, 'The influence of business models and the language of MAT policy and practice has clearly emphasised private sector and corporate structures.' For Smithers (2011, cited in Garner, 2011:1), the pace of change and vast array of different school types has created a 'liquorice allsorts' system, which, according to Glatter (2018:5), 'hinders the collection of robust evidence about which policies and reforms have worked and why.' Trying to understand the motivations, reasoning, decision-making and concerns of different players working within, 'the fragmentation of delivery that characterises the English system' (Cappon, 2015:53) and the 'black box of academies and academy chains' (Finch et al., 2016:12) is what inspired this research.

1.2 My Interest

I was the Headteacher of a large 11-19 secondary school for ten years between 2005 and 2015. At the beginning of my Headship, academies were a very small part of the educational landscape, the sole preserve of the inner-city and a small group of private sponsors. 95% of schools in England were local authority (LA) maintained and there was very little opportunity to step outside this model. My school was LA maintained for the first three years and then converted to Foundation status. This decision was taken in response to the local context as all neighbouring secondary schools had Foundation status and were being selective with their admissions. Unlike the original grant-

maintained (GM) schools that operated between 1988 and 1998, there were actually few freedoms associated with becoming 'Foundation'. GM schools were truly independent from local control, were funded directly from central government, and had discretion over pay and conditions for staff, admissions, and the ownership and selling of land. Large financial incentives were built into the programme to encourage schools to convert, including an average uplift of 20% in funding. The new Labour government of 1997, and the resultant 1998 *School Standards and Framework Act*, abolished GM status and returned schools to the oversight of local authorities (LAs). Two new categories of school were created - 'Community' and 'Foundation' - with the latter having slightly more independence than the former. Leading a Foundation school was very much like leading a Community one - the LA provided a school improvement partner, monitored performance, directed funds and audited accounts. In the area of admissions, however, there was some discretion - this control being our main motivation to change.

As Headteacher, I found the LA model paradoxical. On the one hand, Headteachers were told they were in charge of their schools whilst, in reality, the LA drove most of the decision-making. Policies were simply there to be implemented - there was no involvement in their design - and it seemed that those schools that led on local-authority initiatives received preferential treatment. I also found the LA's control over staffing (they were the employer) and the finances problematic, with monies 'top sliced' from the school without any control over where they were spent. Over time, I also found myself increasingly resentful of the cadre of school improvement professionals sent into the school by the LA to offer advice and guidance. Many of their practices were outdated and it felt odd that they were seen as 'experts' when they had no recent school experience. There were advantages to the LA model, however. Discretionary funds could often be obtained quickly for projects, with legal and human resources support (HR) available at minimal cost. The LA could also usefully be deployed as a 'shield' when difficult decisions had to be made, the school simply claiming it was implementing what it had been told to.

With the election of the Coalition government in 2010, and the subsequent passing of the Academies Act, I saw an opportunity. I wanted to take advantage of the 'freedoms' being proposed in areas such as pay and conditions, curriculum and school improvement. I also wanted access to the funds paid to the LA by the government on behalf of the school. As a result, in December 2010, we converted to academy status without a sponsor. Over the next five years, every secondary school in our locality followed but only 2% of primary schools. During that time, our budget increased by 25% as we took advantage of the substantial financial incentives on offer, including capital grants and subsidised insurance and utilities. For the first three years, the school operated with very little external oversight. Graded as 'outstanding' by Ofsted, we were left to develop our own curriculum and forge our own destiny. It was an exciting and innovative time. Gradually, however, with the introduction of Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) in 2014, the channelling of school funding back through LAs in 2015, and the implementation of highly formalised new national performance measures in 2016, the opportunities for autonomous decision-making became increasingly restricted.

It was during this time that I became interested in the obsession of successive governments with school structures as a vehicle to drive school improvement. After ten years of Headship, I had worked within three different systems and, a strategic review commissioned by school Governors in 2015, brought the realisation that a fourth system, the MAT, was fast becoming the preferred option of government. Financial incentives, previously reserved for academies, were now being directed towards MATs. As a result, we decided to take a leap of faith. At the Governors' request, I voluntarily stepped down from the Headship and was asked to co-ordinate the joining of three schools (two primaries and a secondary) into a new MAT. My new position was 'Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Designate', on a 12-month contract, with the financing of this new post paid through proportionate contributions from each school. That is where both this journey and this research project began.

1.3 Rationale and Aims

Despite the seismic change in the structure and delivery of education over the last ten years, relatively little attention has been paid to the drivers, obstacles and motivations behind schools becoming academies and joining MATs. For the majority of schools, conversion remains a voluntary decision, but with the process taking up to 18 months, a paucity of research exists into the journey itself and the challenges, opportunities and concerns expressed by Governors and Senior Leaders throughout this process. Gunter, Woods and Woods, as early as 2008, identified a need for:

*Case studies of the origins and development of academies, not least the way that the consultation process operates. There is a need to examine the control of the process: knowledge and information; time limits; where meetings are held; the role of project management companies; the media; and how staff, students, parents and the community are involved.
(Gunter, Woods and Woods, 2008:5)*

However, very little of this has taken place with Ofsted (2019) adding:

*...although there is a burgeoning body of knowledge about central vision and approaches within MATs, we know less about how these influence day-to-day practice in schools, and to what extent MATs are having a positive or otherwise impact on the work of leaders and teachers in the schools we inspect.
(Ofsted, 2019:6)*

The vast majority of research focuses solely on the performance and outcomes of sponsored academies. Within this, the works of Salokangas and Chapman (2014), and Salokangas and Ainscow (2018), are an exception. The first of their studies focuses on two chains of academies and the changes experienced by staff working within them, whilst the second is a longitudinal ten-year study of 'Parkside Academy'. Once again, however, both studies are exclusively focused post-conversion and only consider academies with a sponsor. To Salokangas and Chapman (2014:372), '...the implications of ...arrangements at a local level remain under-researched.' Similarly, Theobald (2018:1) notes, 'Multi-Academy trusts (MATs) are a growing part of the

education landscape, but there is little formal research investigating how MATs operate or how this relates to performance.'

This research project aims to make a small contribution towards filling this gap. In particular, by focusing on three schools from different backgrounds, LA maintained, foundation and academy, the similarities and differences of each school's journey will be explored, with useful insights obtained into the part a school's past plays in its future decision making. To the best of my knowledge, no other study has taken this approach. Another distinctive feature of my research is its focus on the decision makers, Governors and Senior Leaders, at three different stages of the conversion process: initial planning and discussion, the point of conversion and 12 months after the MAT's formation. This time frame was particularly significant as it offered an opportunity to reflect on, and explore, whether perceived benefits had materialised, concerns had been alleviated, or new issues arisen. Once again there is little research in this area as conversion is usually seen as the 'end point' of the journey rather than a part of it.

In this study, a theoretical review of the literature relevant to the research questions was developed. This was followed by the construction of a Conceptual Framework of key themes, focused through the lens of autonomy. Autonomy, as a concept, sits at the heart of the academies' programme with its emphasis on freedom, independence and innovation. It is the fulcrum around which issues of accountability, power, control, partnership and ideology rotate. By exploring the journeys of Governors and Senior Leaders, those elements that support and hinder a successful transition can be identified. These findings are then reflected back through the prism of the Conceptual Framework to identify areas of similarity, divergence and difference, with the aim of improving the conversion process for those schools looking to join MATs in the future.

1.4 Research Questions

In light of the rationale and aims outlined above, the following overarching research question was formulated:

How is the interplay between autonomy and accountability experienced at different points in the evolution of a MAT?

Within this, the following supplementary questions were identified:

(1) What are the motivations and drivers for Governors and Senior Leaders throughout the MAT journey?

(2) What are the main issues and concerns at different stages?

(3) What elements support a successful conversion?

(4) What elements hinder a successful conversion?

(5) 12 months after conversion, what benefits have been realised? What issues remain and why?

1.5 Methodology and Positionality

This research project involves three case studies of schools looking to convert into a MAT within a local authority in England. There is also a case study of the MAT itself. The description by Merriam (1988:xiv) of a qualitative case study as, 'intensive, holistic, description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit' was particularly relevant to this research project. Her defining characteristics of case study as particularistic, descriptive and heuristic were adopted, as I was researching a particular situation, (the journey of three schools at a particular time), producing a detailed description of the event, (people's motivations and understanding during the conversion), and illuminating readers' understanding, (identification of key issues for schools

looking to join a MAT), with the aim of what Merriam (1988:49) refers to as, '...expanding the knowledge base.'

Two of the case study schools are primary and one secondary. One of the primaries is LA maintained with approximately 360 pupils, whilst the second has 450 pupils on roll and has Foundation status. The secondary school, with 2200 pupils on roll, is a Converter Academy. In this research project, the conversion process began in September 2016 with the aim of all three schools converting concurrently into the MAT on September 1st, 2017. For two of the schools, conversion into an academy took place simultaneously with the incorporation into the MAT. A distinction is not made between the two processes as it was never raised as an issue by the schools concerned, and was a legal requirement following changes to legislation in 2016.

Data collection involved questionnaires and interviews with Governors and Senior Leaders at three different stages within the conversion process. The first data collection round took place in September/October 2016 at the beginning of discussions. This was supported by a second round of data collection as schools converted into the MAT in August/September 2017, with a final collection 12 months after conversion in September/October 2018. The same respondents were approached for each set of questionnaires, with anonymity protected but with the ability to track responses back to each school. A detailed explanation of the sampling strategy, and selection of participants, is provided in the Methodology chapter.

In this research project, I faced the twin challenges of being an insider researcher and an insider researcher in a position of power. As a former Headteacher of one of the schools undertaking the MAT journey, and as the CEO designate of the new MAT, I was in an influential and unique role. There were advantages to holding this position. Access to information, an understanding of the culture being studied, awareness of local politics, and knowing best how to approach people, were all of benefit in getting responses to my research requests. No one refused to be interviewed and a

questionnaire response rate of over 90% exceeded that normally expected for such a project. Whilst this may, or may not, have been related to my position of power, it would be naive not to consider it a possibility. There were also disadvantages to being an insider researcher. Greater familiarity with context could mean things were overlooked, or taken for granted, whilst confidentiality and ongoing personal and professional relationships could blur the lines between professional and research roles, with impartiality and bias then becoming problematic. Furthermore, there is sometimes an implicit assumption that greater familiarity can lead to a lack of objectivity, although as Caruna (2015:71) notes, ‘...with effort and training, it is possible to achieve an awareness of the problems that might arise from bias and take the necessary steps to try and avoid them as much as possible.’

Throughout this study, I always kept issues of validity and bias at the forefront of my thinking as issues surrounding positionality and power may have created unforeseen implications. Prior to each stage of data collection, I issued an ‘Ethical Statement’ clearly outlining the purposes of the research project and my responsibilities. The use of multiple case studies, alongside the triangulation of evidence from different sources, enhanced the validity of the data and helped identify any anomalies. By using a pilot study, and reflective journal, I was able to reflect on my own biases and assumptions and improve the processes and procedures as the research developed. By employing multiple methods to gather evidence, alongside an explicit model of data analysis, and a range of construct validity techniques such as audit trail and pattern matching, I further enhanced reliability and transferability. In addition, the use of an expert peer-reviewer to cast an objective, critical eye over my data collection processes, shadow interviews, and evaluate my interpretations of evidence, was invaluable in identifying possible bias and unforeseen ethical implications. These points will be developed in detail in the Methodology chapter.

1.6 The Journey through this Research Project

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

This section establishes the study's background and rationale. It gives an account of my interest in this research and my role within it. I suggest that, over the relatively brief period of ten years, the organisation of schooling in England has changed significantly. With research predominantly focused on established academies and MATs, an under-researched area remains the journey before, and after, the establishment of these new structures and the drivers, motivations and concerns of the key players involved in decision-making. Through focusing these journeys through the lens of autonomy, I argue that related issues of accountability, power, control, ideology and partnership can be explored.

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

The history and origins of the academies' programme is explored and whether or not it is a natural evolution of the educational policies pursued by both Labour and Conservative governments over the last thirty years. This section also explores whether the original aims of the academies' programme - social justice and promoting equality - were ever realised. It ends with a discussion over what elements of the academies' programme could be deemed 'evolutionary' or 'revolutionary', and whether the widely promoted 'freedoms' are indeed new.

The second section focuses on the key concept of autonomy, the lens through which all other concepts are focused. It discusses what 'autonomy' actually means, what it looks like on the ground, and whether it is a significant driver for schools becoming academies. The tension between autonomy and accountability across government policy is explored, with particular reference to the introduction of Regional Schools Commissioners in 2014. This section ends with a detailed discussion of MATs, what the purported

'freedoms' of academy status actually are, and whether these are being curtailed and diminished by the very structures intended to promote them.

In part three, issues of control and power are explored through the changing role of local educational authorities and their relationship with schools. Questions around the 'middle tier' in education - who occupies it, its impact on autonomy and whether it is still needed - are discussed, alongside the function of RSCs, Teaching Schools, Ofsted and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). The section closes with an analysis of what now constitutes the 'middle tier', and, to what extent, MATs are replicating the role of LAs.

Section four is divided into two parts. The first explores the educational rationale for academies, through an analysis of the performance data of sponsored and Converter Academies, whilst the second considers the ideological arguments emanating from both sides of the political divide: academies as a neo-liberal political construct or as a pragmatic response to decades of educational failure. This section closes with an exploration of the reasons, most frequently cited by schools and school leaders, as to why they converted to academy status and into MATs. In the penultimate section, federated school structures are considered alongside their similarities and differences to MATs. The advantages and disadvantages of the federated model are discussed, and the reasons why Federations remain under-developed and under-promoted as a model for school improvement. The final section focuses on case studies of MATs and the common issues emerging from these. The purposes, drivers and motivations behind MAT growth are examined, alongside a discussion of the politicised nature of much of the research surrounding MAT effectiveness and performance.

Following the theoretical review of the literature, the main themes and observations are identified and distilled into a Conceptual Framework. This synthesises the key arguments and ideas, considering issues of accountability, control, ideology and partnership from the perspective of

autonomy. These concepts then frame the Findings, Analysis and Discussions chapters of this study, drawing together the hypotheses and emergent conclusions.

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

Research paradigms are explored in the first part of this section. Within this, the qualitative/quantitative debate is referenced, alongside a discussion of positivism, interpretivism and critical postmodernism. The placement of this study within an interpretivist tradition, with a phenomenological underpinning, is explained alongside the rationale for a qualitative study. Case study as an appropriate methodology for the research questions is discussed, with specific reference to the work of Merriam (1988), Yin (1994) and Stake (1995), and the reasons that a multiple case study approach was adopted. The chapter continues with a detailed overview of 'insider research' and its associated advantages and disadvantages. Special attention is paid to insider knowledge, and the potential conflict between professional and research roles, as these were of particular relevance to this study. Issues of impartiality, bias and power are discussed, with links made to my own role and positionality. Different sampling strategies are explored, with explanations for the methods chosen to address the research questions. The selection of participants for questionnaires and interviews, and the strategy that underpins this, are examined, alongside issues of data linking and confidentiality. Related to this is a detailed consideration of the six core ethical principles, outlined in the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2015) *Framework for Research Ethics*, and the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) *Ethical Guidelines*. The data collection process is explored, alongside an explanation of the choice of questionnaires and interviews and the rationale behind their design. The changes made as a result of the pilot study are also discussed. The penultimate section of the Methodology chapter discusses the data validation techniques used in this research project, including issues of construct validity and confirmability. Internal and external validation techniques, such as triangulation, pattern

matching and expert peer-review are outlined, alongside the benefits and limitations of the methods chosen. Finally, how data was collected, organised and structured to facilitate analysis, and to formulate conclusions, is examined within the four-stage coding and analysis process adopted in this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: Findings and Analysis

This chapter begins with an overview of the case study schools and the MAT. The tension between autonomy and accountability, highlighted within the overarching research question is then examined, through the findings and analysis of the supplementary research questions, and a detailed discussion of their significance and value.

Overarching Research Question:

How is the interplay between autonomy and accountability experienced at different points in the evolution of a MAT?

Supplementary Questions:

(1) What are the motivations and drivers for Governors and Senior Leaders throughout the MAT journey?

The drivers and motivations for becoming an academy (if applicable) and joining a multi-academy will be explored by considering the responses of Governors and Senior Leaders from the three schools. Whether these motivations change during the conversion process is examined, alongside an analysis of any differences in academy, foundation and maintained settings.

(2) What are the main issues and concerns at different stages?

The perceived issues and concerns of Governors and Senior Leaders prior to conversion are explored, with a focus on whether particular issues are unique to different school settings. Whether these issues and concerns change during, and following, the transition into the MAT is also considered.

(3) What elements support a successful conversion?

Those elements that support a successful transition into a MAT are explored, with an emphasis on the conversion process itself. The findings are compared with case studies of MATs and Federations to identify those elements that need to be in place to ensure a successful transfer process.

(4) What elements hinder a successful conversion?

Those factors that hinder the transition process and make transfer into a MAT more difficult are examined. Differences in opinion between Governors and Senior Leaders, and what can be done to overcome obstacles and barriers to conversion, are explored and analysed.

(5) 12 months after conversion, what benefits have been realised? What issues remain and why?

This section explores the state of affairs 12 months after the transition. It discusses what the identified benefits of conversion have been, alongside any ongoing issues and concerns. By drawing a comparison between respondents' original motivations, and their experiences one year on, the study will consider the extent to which aspirations have been realised, or otherwise, and the reasons why.

CHAPTER FIVE: Discussion

This chapter considers each of the research questions in turn. Through the prism of the Conceptual Framework, it discusses and analyses the key themes

and findings of this study, any areas of commonality, divergence, challenge and difference with the literature, and areas of potential further exploration.

CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion

The final chapter examines the research questions in the light of the journeys undertaken, setting out the key findings of this study. It also draws together new perspectives on the conversion process itself. The findings are discussed as a basis for further research, their contribution to theory, and for possible recommendations to policy makers, Governors and Senior Leaders. Finally, I sum up my final thoughts, considering what I would do differently if approaching the research again, and where, I believe, the findings to have particular importance and originality.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The literature review is the theoretical framework for this study and explores the main themes and subject matter relating to academies and MATs. It examines the origins of the academies' programme discussing its uniqueness and distinctive features, alongside its controversies and criticisms. The literature review informs the research questions and the structure of the methodology. Within the overarching theme of autonomy, it is divided into six sections: Evolution and/or Revolution?; Autonomy and/or Central Control?; Local Educational Authorities Revisited?; Educational and/or Ideological?; Federations, and Multi-Academy Trusts, all key areas that emerged from the reading.

2.2 Evolution and/or Revolution?

*Sponsors do not need to be educational experts because they appoint a principal to run the schools, but they should bring high expectations and a track record of success. And they can help in creating a "can-do" brand that supports success.
(Moynihan, 2008:14).*

*Power over children's education is being handed over to a rag-tag bunch of second-hand car dealers, carpet salesmen and tax-evading city traders.
(Wrigley, 2009:48).*

A key debate of the academies' programme is whether it is a natural evolution of the educational policies promoted by both Labour and Conservative governments over a period of thirty years, or a seismic change in direction and policy emanating from the introduction of the Academies Act in 2010. It is still an ongoing argument. Supporters of the 'evolution' argument hark back to the introduction of CTCs in 1988. For the first time, sponsors from the private and charitable sectors were allowed to run schools free from the constraints of the National Curriculum, and able to determine their own pay and conditions for staff. Supporters of the 'revolution' argument, however,

such as Woods and Simkins (2014:324), claim that it was the 2010 Act that constituted, ‘...the most radical systemic change since “Local Management of Schools” (LMS) was instituted by the Education Reform Act (1988).’ This chapter will discuss what, if anything, the academies programme does differently, and whether it comprises genuinely new ideas or revisited and repackaged former initiatives.

2.2.1 The Origins and Development of the Academies Programme

The first seeds of the academies’ programme were sown in the 1988 ERA. CTCs were introduced and schools could ‘opt-out’ of local educational authority control and become ‘grant-maintained’ with funding provided directly from central government. However, it was the Learning and Skills Act (2000) that first brought the word ‘academy’ into the educational lexicon. The ‘City Academy’, introduced in this Act, was a new type of school, intended to either replace an existing, failing, institution or to provide a new school in an area of sustained educational underperformance.

An early study by PricewaterhouseCoopers entitled ‘*Academies Evaluation*’ describes the purpose of academies as:

driving up standards by raising achievement levels for their own pupils, their family of schools and the wider community by breaking the cycle of underachievement and low aspirations in areas of deprivation with historical low performance...[and]

academies will be part of local strategies to increase choice and diversity in education. They will have innovative approaches to one or more of governance, curriculum, staffing structures and pay, teaching and learning, structure of the school day and year, using ICT.
(PWC; 2003 cited in Curtis et al., 2008)

In the next two sections, each of these statements will be considered in turn as they reach to the heart of the academies’ initiative and its claimed aims, values and purpose.

The Academies programme (2000-2010) - Social Justice and Equality?

For the Labour government (1997-2010), a strong sense of moral purpose underpinned the creation of the original City Academies. Central to this strategy was the role of academies in driving up standards and positively impacting on the wider community. Labour saw the development of the academies' programme, and the role of private sponsors in education, as a means of furthering social justice (Whitty, 2008; Eyles and Machin, 2014), with Goodman and Burton (2011:60) concluding, 'the attempt to simultaneously endorse the free market and social justice is characteristic of the Third way ethos underlying Labour's policies under Tony Blair.' For Labour, the private sector could be involved in the delivery of public services, as long as there was a commitment to reducing inequality and promoting community cohesion. It was this joint prioritisation of equality and marketization that positioned Labour away from the neo-liberalism of the Conservatives. Some commentators (Tomlinson, 2005; Stevenson, 2011; Ball, 2012) saw the introduction of private markets and sponsors into education as reinforcing, rather than reducing, existing social hierarchies by ignoring questions about economic distribution of wealth and the dominance of public and grammar schools. Callaghan (2012) agreed. She looked at the background of the sponsors of the 203 academies operating in 2009 and found that the vast majority were establishment-led: public schools, church sponsors, wealthy philanthropists and Christian organisations. As Wrigley (2009) comments:

"Philanthropy" essentially involves rich men and women enhancing their self-respect and public reputation by handing back some money to the desperately poor. Whatever the motives of the individual philanthropist, it is inherently hypocritical, since philanthropists generally become rich by exploiting the poor.
(Wrigley, 2009:52)

The work of Titcombe (2008:49) raised further concerns about whether academies improved, or reduced, access to social justice and equality. This research found, 'worryingly degraded curriculum opportunities in a number

of academies... giving rise to concerns that some, or even all, pupils in some of these schools are being denied a right to a broad and balanced educational experience.' Stevens (2011) agreed, pointing out that rapid improvements in outcomes had been brought about by the substitution of general curriculum subjects with easier vocational alternatives that had disproportionate equivalence to GCSE pass rates. In Titcombe's view, 'Such moves increase results rapidly but also present a belief in the need to train pupils for their role in the practices and ethics of free market capitalism so as to properly prepare them for employment' (Titcombe, 2008:76). In other words, pupils in sponsored academies were being prepared for low-paid jobs in the workplace.

The Academies Programme (2010-present) - Social Injustice and Inequality?

*Conservative philosophy focuses on liberty and 'fraternity', but not equality.... Without state regulation of education, will it be possible to protect fully the needs of the least advantaged in society and guarantee comparable educational quality for all?
(Exley and Ball, 2011:15)*

The Academies Act (2010) was the first piece of legislation introduced by the Conservative-led Coalition government and offered all schools the opportunity to become academies, whether through establishing their own academy trusts or working with a sponsor. Like its predecessor government, the Coalition saw enhancing autonomy through the academies' programme as raising standards and narrowing the achievement gap. There were, however, key differences. Under Labour, academies were only located in deprived areas or built to replace under-achieving schools. Under the Coalition, schools did not need to be under-performing in order to gain academy status. In fact, on the contrary, 'converter' academies were those schools most likely to be highest attaining and judged as 'outstanding' or 'good' by Ofsted.

Machin and Vernoit (2011) explored those schools that applied to become academies during 2010-2011 and found them to be amongst the most advantaged. In their view, the difference between the old and new style academies, rather than reducing inequality, actually bolstered advantage and exacerbated existing inequalities. Baker (2010) agreed:

*...the stark difference between Labour's academies and the new version lies in the underlying philosophy. The former were about central government intervention to rectify the problems of market failure. They rescued children who were left in the schools that few parents would choose. By contrast, the new generation of academies are about releasing market forces in the belief that autonomous schools responding to parental choice will raise standards.
(Baker, 2010:3)*

Critics of Baker (2010), such as Moynihan (2008), and Cirin (2014), however, point out that it is not only high-performing schools that can be fast tracked to academy status. Low-performing schools can also apply, as long as they have a sponsor. In theory, therefore, less-privileged children could still 'benefit' from attending an academy.

There is a substantial body of evidence (Gorard, 2014; National Audit Office, 2014; Andrews and Perera, 2017) to suggest that when schools become academies, the number of pupils entitled to free school meals (FSM) decreases as pupil performance improves. These studies also suggest that academies become more attractive to parents of relatively high-attaining pupils with the gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils actually widening. As a result, there is a risk of creating a 'two-tier system' (Gunter, 2011; Goodman and Burton, 2012).

The Coalition government defended Converter Academies by claiming that 'outstanding' and 'good' schools would partner weaker ones in order to help them improve. Once again, the stated aim was to address inequality and improve social justice. Goodman and Burton (2012:61) accepted this premise without question, 'It is a DfE requirement that fast-tracked schools support at

least one weaker school and that this support is focused on having a measurable impact on standards'. In reality, however, it was a tokenism. All a 'converter' academy had to do was name a school to support - there was no checking that support ever took place, no measuring of impact, nor repercussions if nothing happened. As the Pearson/RSA (2013:4) report entitled, '*Unleashing Greatness; Getting the best from an academized system*' notes, 'The Commission finds that, not all these 'Converter Academies' are fulfilling their commitment to supporting other schools to improve.' Such a light-touch approach suggests the social and moral aims of the academies' programme were of much less interest to the Coalition than they were to its predecessor government. Collaborations generated by a need to fulfil external requirements inevitably tend to be limited, and fragile, in nature and, as Goodman and Burton (2012:69) point out, '...the extent to which weaker schools may benefit from such partnerships depends on the commitment of stronger schools in helping weaker schools improve.'

2.2.2 The Distinguishing Features of Academies

Central to any discussion as to whether the academies' programme is 'evolutionary' or 'revolutionary' is a detailed consideration of the distinguishing features of academy schools. The New Schools Network (NSN, 2015) provides a useful guide, reproduced in Appendix A. Of the areas identified, exemption from the National Curriculum, freedom to change day and term lengths, the ability to employ unqualified teachers and the ownership of land and physical assets are the most unique.

The Pearson/RSA (2013) Academies Commission report describes academies as having the freedom to:

- *set their own curriculum, subject to teaching a broad and balanced curriculum; that includes English, mathematics, science and religious education*
- *set the length of the school day and term*
- *appoint their own staff and set their own staff pay and conditions of service, subject to complying with employment law*

- *set and manage their own budgets, subject to certain restrictions*
- *act as their own admissions authority and set their own admissions criteria, subject to following the School Admissions Code*
- *determine their own governance structures, subject to the inclusion of two parent governors.*
(Pearson/RSA; 2013:44-45)

Similarly, Curtis et al. (2008) identified the following key areas that distinguished academies from maintained schools:

- *Independence*
- *Freedom over pay and conditions*
- *Admissions*
- *Curriculum and Specialist subjects*
- *Governance and Sponsorship*

As can be seen there is considerable uniformity around these areas. Each will now be considered in turn.

Independence and autonomy

In many respects, the defining characteristic of academies is their autonomy and independence from local authorities. The 1988 ERA enabled schools to 'opt-out' of LA control and become grant-maintained schools who enjoyed many of the same 'freedoms' currently associated with academies. The Governing Body was the employer and schools were able to vary their pay and conditions. Governing Bodies were also their own admissions' authorities and the owners of land, buildings and assets.

Under the Academies Act (2010), schools were also able to retain a percentage of the Local Authority Spend and Equivalent Grant (LACSEG). This was money provided by central government to the LA to run services on behalf of that school. The argument was that as a school no longer had access to these services it should not be paying for them, although this argument ignores the wider social equity responsibilities of local authorities. Out of this additional LACSEG funding, academies would buy in the services that were no

longer provided for them by the LA, thereby allowing them to explore a range of options and different providers. However, despite this autonomy over service provision being emphasised as a key advantage of academy status, it had been available since LMS in the early 1990s. (Goodman and Burton, 2012; Mansell, 2016; Rayner et al., 2018).

Similar to the academies' programme, generous financial incentives were built into the GM initiative, including double funding for the first two years and access to a new range of capital grants. For most schools, whether when opting out to become GM in the 1980s, or choosing to adopt academy status post-2010, increased funding, rather than enhanced autonomy, was the main driver (Bassett et al., 2012; Mansell, 2016). As Mansell (2016) puts it:

The most-cited reason did not directly relate to autonomy at all, but to additional money, with the academies programme widely seen, especially in the first two years of the coalition, to be offering a financial windfall to schools converting, which was largely hidden in the intricacies of academy funding formulae. (Mansell, 2016:10-11)

Several commentators (Curtis et al., 2008; Cirin, 2014; Hatcher, 2014; Boyask, 2018) claim school leaders had lost faith in the capacity and ability of LAs to deliver improvement and this was the main impetus for change. Of these studies cited, however, each has clear methodological weaknesses: Curtis et al. (2008) focusing only on Labour academies, Cirin (2014) not including the views of maintained school Headteachers, whilst Hatcher's (2014) and Boyask's (2018) research is very small scale. Other researchers, such as Gleeson (2011), and Smith and Abbott (2014), found no widespread evidence that Heads of academy schools were seeking unilateral independence from local government. For Junemann and Ball (2013), 'the transformed/transforming landscape of state education is the effect of a long process of many changes which can be traced back to the Education Reform Act of 1988.'

The 1988 ERA was important in three ways: it created an alternative network of schools; schools were re-structured to adapt them to market pressures; and it introduced diversification and choice - all later drivers of the academies' programme.

Baker (2010), argues:

*But while it could have far-reaching implications, the Academies Act actually turns back the clock to a reform brought in 22 years ago. For make no mistake, what we are being promised is not an extension of the Labour government's academies, but the recreation of the Grant-Maintained (GM) schools created by Mrs Thatcher's government in 1988.
(Baker, 2010:1)*

In his view, 'The political philosophy behind GM schools was to recreate the recipe for success that existed in the private sector - autonomous institutions led by confident and entrepreneurial head teachers' (Baker, 2010:3). In other words, greater independence and freedom would automatically lead to higher standards.

'Freedom' over pay and conditions

Unlike schools in the maintained sector, academies possess autonomy over the length of the school day and term times and do not need to abide by nationally agreed pay structures. Once again, this is not new as GM schools in the 1980s had exactly the same powers. In reality, most evidence points to academies not choosing to put these 'freedoms' into practice (Bassett et al., 2012; Pearson/RSA; 2013; Mansell, 2016), owing to recruitment challenges and union opposition. Whilst the research of Cirin (2014) points to an increasing use of flexibilities, his study is very much an outlier and has the methodological weakness of not having a control group - LA schools being surveyed but not included. As a result, it is difficult to conclude whether or not the 'freedoms' reportedly used by academies are also utilised in the maintained sector. With national pay and conditions in place for the last twenty-five years, and well understood by Governors and Senior Leaders, it

is not hard to understand why 'freedoms' which might seem available in theory are not widely taken up in reality (Mansell, 2016; Glatter, 2018).

Curriculum and specialism

A further freedom granted to academies is flexibility in terms of pedagogy, with a requirement that the curriculum is simply 'broad and balanced.' However, this licence to be innovative does not free academies from national performance and assessment targets, with Mansell (2016:12) arguing that, 'accountability pressures - the need of schools of all types to demonstrate improved assessment results - can severely constrain curricular freedoms.' Under the Academies Act (2010), converting secondary schools are expected to place an emphasis on one or more subject areas. However, this idea of a 'specialism' is not unique - as long ago as 2008, 92% of secondary schools classified themselves as being 'specialist' - this being another example of 'evolution' rather than 'revolution.'

Surveying 478 academies, over a three-month period, the research of Bassett et al. (2012:4) found, 'Only a third of schools said that obtaining freedom from the National Curriculum was a reason for them becoming an academy, [curriculum changes] are typically minor and often changes they would have made anyway.' The Pearson/RSA (2013:50) report surveyed 477 Teach First respondents, which on its own is a skewed sample, and found little difference between the maintained and non-maintained sectors, in terms of the use of 'academy freedoms' - concluding, 'most things an academy can do, a maintained school can also do.' Indeed, many of the 'evolutionary' curriculum changes, introduced since 2010, such as a return to linear GCSEs, reduction in coursework, and the introduction of a new Progress 8 measure, have severely constrained schools' curricular choices with Mansell (2016:13) concluding:

...although academies may in theory have the freedom to depart from the national curriculum, given that the assessments through which they continue to be held to account are based on the curriculum, this apparent autonomy seems likely, at least in relation to the core subjects around which accountability continues to revolve, to be more notional than real.

Admissions

Maintained schools' admissions are managed by LAs whilst academies are their own admissions' authorities. Once again this is not new. GM schools had the same powers and, even when this category of school was abolished under the School Standards and Framework Act (1998), their successors, Foundation schools, retained this control. However, prior to 2010, a LA had much greater oversight and control of admissions for the schools within an area than is now the case.

Whilst academies must have in place procedures to promote equality, and to support the disadvantaged, Tough and Brooks (2007:16) raise concerns that without a designated body in place to ensure that admissions' procedures are adhered to fairly, schools could covertly select pupils on the basis of ability. In their research, academies were significantly less likely to represent the social makeup of a local area than maintained schools. The Pearson/RSA (2013:65) report warns, 'Increasing competition and high stakes accountability, coupled with research showing how oversubscribed schools can manipulate the admissions system, provoke concerns that selective admissions may become more prevalent', with Larsen et al. (2011:116) observing, 'A key concern is ensuring fair and equitable access for all pupils, and particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, for whom the programme was originally intended.'

With the enormous rise in schools becoming their own admissions' authorities since 2010, there is a risk that social selection will increase. Whether changes to school admissions policies are more evolutionary than revolutionary, therefore, remains debatable. GM schools were able to partially select their intakes with agreement from the Secretary of State, and the research of Levinson et al. (2002), found some schools successfully applied to become fully-selective, others introduced partial selection, and some practised selection by interview, often causing friction with local authorities. All schools are now bound by a common admissions' code, but

with no recourse to the local government ombudsman for parents of pupils in academies, discriminatory practices are likely to go unchecked.

Governance and sponsorship

Academy trusts have the authority to shape their governance structures more or less as they choose. There are two layers of academy governance: academy Members, who sit at the top of the governance structure for single academies or MATs and Directors/Trustees. The Members have ultimate responsibility for ensuring the Trust achieves its objectives. They agree to the articles of association and appoint and remove directors. In sponsored academies, the lead sponsor controls the governing body by appointing the majority of members and directors. The Directors act collectively as the Trust's governing body and must ensure that it complies with company and charity law and with the Trust's funding agreement with the Secretary of State.

The (2015) DfE Governance Handbook explains, 'Academy trusts have almost complete flexibility to design the constitution of the Board of Directors (BoD) as they see fit in order to ensure it has the necessary skills and capacity to carry out its functions effectively' (DfE; 2015:26-27). For the constitution of the BoD, the only requirements are that there should be at least two elected parent directors, with no more than a third of the BoD employees of the Trust, and fewer than one in five LA associated. This is a very different arrangement to that which existed for GM Schools, where there were no sponsors. However, the decline in LA influence can be traced back to 1988, with the removal of LA Governors and the encouragement to co-opt members of the business world and local communities.

Under the Academies Act (2010), it is only low performing schools that require a sponsor in order to convert to academy status and no financial contribution is required. Sponsors hold an advisory role and can set the ethos and management structure, supporting the school through their involvement with the Governing Body.

According to the DfE (GOV.UK; 2019):

*Academy sponsors are responsible for: setting up the academy trust; appointing (and working with) the leadership team; selecting the governing body; monitoring the academy's performance and taking action where necessary; reporting to DfE; involving parents and the wider community ... and businesses links; and making sure the academy spends its funding effectively.
(GOV.UK; 2019)*

Hatcher (2006) argues that academy sponsorship is seen by sponsors in the context of their record of charitable donations and community activities rather than for any materialistic purpose, whilst, for Gunter (2011:10), 'Innovation seems to be largely conservative with the use of uniforms, house systems and the reintroduction of head boy and girl roles.' Under Labour, sponsors were unable to profit financially from their sponsorship. However, since 2010, the lines have become increasingly blurred. Sponsors can insist that schools buy into costly central services and some 'top slice' up to 20% of a school's budget. With some sponsors running up to fifty schools, there are now substantial opportunities to make large profits with a report for SchoolsWeek in 2019, citing a Trust that siphoned £376,000 off a school already £1 million in deficit before moving it to another Trust (Allen-Kinross, 2019).

2.2.3 Summary

Whether the development of academies is 'evolutionary' or 'revolutionary' is still open to debate. By January 2018, there were 6,996 open academies in England, compared to 200 at the end of 2010. Even after ten years of the GM programme, there were only 1200 schools holding that status. The move away from LA state education is not new. GM schools pioneered the way and, in many ways, the Academies Act (2010) was just a modernised relaunch, with Baker (2010:4) referring to it as, 'GM Mark II' and Stevenson (2011:183) 'the realisation of the 1988 project.' For Goodman and Burton (2012:72), the 'ethos then was the same as it is now: to increase diversity and therefore

competition whilst reducing the role of the LEA (now the LA) by allowing schools to receive their funding directly from central government.'

There is less difference between academies and maintained schools than is often assumed. In many ways this is because academies' autonomy is partly illusory. Despite the numbers converting since 2010, actual change has been modest. Whilst academies may, in theory, have freedom over pay and conditions, the length of the school day, and how they deliver the curriculum, they face the same accountability and league table pressures as maintained schools. Similarly, recruitment and retention issues remain acute whatever the category of school, hindering opportunities to reduce salaries and change pay and conditions. As many researchers have noted, the educational policies of Conservative and Labour administrations are surprisingly similar (Strain and Simkins, 2008; Whitty, 2008) and more 'evolutionary' than 'revolutionary' (Gunter, 2011; Stevenson, 2011; Ball, 2013) with West and Pennell (2002:218) concluding, 'The Labour government can be seen to have embraced the quasi-market with the same enthusiasm to that of its Conservative predecessors.' However, for West and Bailey (2013:138), 'Whilst there is clear evidence of policy continuity, the hierarchy of policy goals (cf. Hall, 1993) and their mix has changed.' The academies' programme, introduced by Labour, had a strong social justice focus. It was seen as an innovative and radical approach that combined the entrepreneurship of the private sector with public sector values. The effect of the Academies Act (2010) was different, not only because of the vast numbers of schools converting, but because the offer was open to all. Despite the nod to social justice in that 'outstanding' and 'good' schools, as judged by Ofsted, were meant to support weaker schools, there was no formal mechanism to ensure this actually happened.

For West and Bailey (2013):

*The converter-academy programme can be seen to be a means of effecting system-wide change by increasing the role of private bodies [academy trusts] in the delivery of school-based education. The function of the policy implemented in 2010 thus differed significantly from previous policies.
(West and Bailey, 2013:154)*

In their view, the academies' policy is 'revolutionary' because a publicly-funded, publicly-delivered, school system is shifting towards one that is publicly funded but privately delivered. Ball (2013) agrees, seeing academies as increasingly blurring the lines between state and private education, with Rayner et al. (2018:147) seeing academisation as not just a legal process but a fundamental change in the state's architecture.

Prior to the Academies Act (2010), key 'freedoms', such as the ability to buy services outside of LAs, vary the length of the school day, and specialise in a particular subject already existed for schools. The Academies Act (2010) may have opened up these 'freedoms' further, but with many institutions reluctant to adopt them, the 'revolution' has been far from complete. Despite this, in nine years, the academies programme has changed the face of schooling in England, with local authorities' influence all but disappearing. Commercial sponsorship arrangements are now commonplace, with 500 new free schools open and the majority of England's children taught in academies. Unknowingly, Glatter in early 2011 wrote, '...academies are and will remain for the foreseeable future a small minority of all publicly funded schools' (Glatter, 2011:159). What has been most significant has been the speed and pace of reform. That is the real 'revolution.'

2.3 Autonomy and/or Central Control?

In particular, the idea that autonomous schools are in a better position to address the needs of the students they teach is a familiar one across the different systems. Similarly, it has been argued that enhancing the autonomy of teachers and school-level management will create conditions in which schools may experiment with educational practice to best address their students' needs and, in so doing, raise attainment. (Salokangas and Ainscow, 2018:9)

2.3.1 The Autonomy Obsession

Sandals and Bryant (2014:13) in their DfE Research Report entitled, 'The evolving education system in England: a temperature check' publish an historical timeline of legislation, across the political spectrum, supporting the enhancement of school autonomy. It is extensive. Described by Salokangas and Ainscow (2018:7), as a 'global trend', frequently cited arguments for increasing autonomy are that it provides the conditions for flexibility and adaptability in school operations and allows decisions to be made on the frontline. In turn, it is often claimed, this leads to improved teaching and learning, greater innovation, enhanced staff commitment and better outcomes for children (Hanushek et al., 2011; Caldwell and Spinks, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2013; Fuchs et al., 2014). As Ladd and Fiske (2016) note:

By giving more schools the autonomy and flexibility that had been provided to the early academies, policy makers hoped that schools would be able to recruit and attract higher quality school leaders who in turn would be able to raise standards through increased innovation. This view is also consistent with a core conservative belief that public services should be run by front-line professionals rather than centralized bureaucracies, regardless of whether those bureaucracies are at the national or local authority level. (Ladd and Fiske, 2016:12)

However, many researchers (Fielding, 2012; Jensen et al., 2013; Hutchings et al., 2014; Bernardinelli et al., 2018) remain unconvinced. They argue that there is no convincing evidence that academies improve standards with the

complexity and fluidity of the academies' sector making accurate comparisons difficult. As the House of Commons Education Select Committee (2015:23) observes, 'Current evidence does not allow us to draw firm conclusions on whether academies are a positive force for change.'

2.3.2 Autonomy and Schools: A Brief History

Across the political spectrum, increased autonomy for schools apparently goes unquestioned as a good idea. The Minister for School Standards, Nick Gibb said in a speech, 'The real genius of school autonomy is that when 1,000 flowers bloom, we are able ... to see which flowers bloom brightest' (Gibb, 2015). In reality, however, is it really that simple? If schools are left to control their own affairs, will standards inevitably rise? Is it true that schools actually have the autonomy and freedom that politicians espouse? To answer these questions, it is important to look at where the arguments for increasing autonomy began and whether schools now feel more empowered to make their own decisions. This section draws upon research from both sponsored and Converter Academies, as many now co-exist within the same MATs or academy chains, with the literature rarely differentiating between the two.

The theme of autonomy runs throughout the 1988 ERA. One of its main provisions was the introduction of a new breed of autonomous schools - City Technology Colleges (CTCs), similar to academies twenty years later. CTCs were targeted at raising standards in urban areas of deprivation, the idea being that sponsors from the charitable or private sector would provide most of the funding. The CTCs themselves could be the employer of staff, giving them the autonomy to break with LA agreed pay and conditions. CTCs were also able to set their own admissions criteria and select part of their pupil intake.

The 1988 ERA also introduced LMS with LAs required to transfer 85% of their educational funds directly to schools. LMS signalled a completely new way of working. It encouraged a 'market-based' approach to education, whereby the school or client could pick and choose between service providers thereby

ending the LA monopoly. Critics, such as Gillard (2018:16), saw the freedom of LMS as largely illusory. In his view, with staffing costs typically accounting for 85%-90% of a school's budget, any scope for innovative practice, or new methods of teaching and learning, were severely limited. He saw LMS as serving three purposes: 'it created an education "market", it took financial control away from LAs, and it enabled government to 'pass the buck' to schools when budgets were cut as they were in six of the eight years following LMS.'

Grant-Maintained schools were also introduced in the ERA 1988, offering all schools the option to obtain funding directly from central government. At a time when educational budgets were being reduced by up to 10% nationally, the large financial incentives built into the programme made it an attractive option for many Governing Bodies. Whilst the 1988 ERA was presented as devolving power back to schools, using very similar language to that later accompanying the Academies Act (2010), in reality, it simply transferred power away from schools and local educational authorities to the Secretary of State. Strain and Simkins (2008:155) describe this as, 'a radical restructuring of powers within the English educational system' before concluding that, 'The reduced role for locally elected representatives in the ERA justified substantial reduction of the powers and duties of the local education authorities (LEAs).' The ERA 1988 also further centralised power through the introduction of a National Curriculum and assessment system that set out the knowledge, skills and understanding children were expected to master at particular ages.

The election of the New Labour government in 1997 extended many Conservative policies with increased centralisation of systems and processes, greater competition between schools and enhanced parental choice (Whitty, 2008; Glatter, 2012). There were differences, however. GM schools were brought back under LA control, and the assisted places scheme, which offered support to the private sector, was abolished. The role of local government was enhanced through the central implementation and policing of initiatives, with

schools given greater autonomy over the curriculum and the range and type of qualification available. For the first time, the 2002 Education Act allowed for deviation from the existing system of education, so that a range of different schools, with differing legal statuses, could operate.

It is the Academies Act (2010) that is generally regarded as introducing a new era of autonomy in England's schools; Ladd and Fiske (2016:6) pointing out, 'The intent, consistent with a conservative worldview, was to give as much autonomy to as many schools as possible.' Despite this claim, however, the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) report of 2011, had already ranked England's schools as the third most autonomous in the world in 2010. As Clifton (2016:2) states, 'The uncomfortable truth for the government is that England has had an autonomous school system for a very long time - that job was done by a previous Conservative government under Kenneth Baker.'

2.3.3 What Does Autonomy Mean and Look Like?

In practice, understanding, defining and measuring autonomy across different contexts is difficult. Whilst the Cambridge English Dictionary describes autonomy as, 'the ability to make your own decisions without being controlled by anyone else' (Cambridge University Press, 2020), for Jensen et al. (2013:27), 'autonomy' is not granted but devolved from elsewhere, making the deciphering of decision-making problematic. Mansell (2016:9) sees autonomy as needing, 'to be considered both in terms of which aspect of school management is covered and according to whether autonomy exists at the level of individual school' whilst Greany and Waterhouse (2016) look at how school leaders use their autonomy, rather than just focusing on decision-making rights. With autonomy meaning different things to different people, and being so difficult to measure, it is not surprising that research findings are often inconsistent and unclear: contingent on the nature and level of autonomy and the kinds of decisions devolved (OECD; 2010); the process and personnel decisions being decentralised (Woessmann, 2007); and a school's

existing accountability structures and level of development (Cheng et al., 2016; Greany and Waterhouse, 2016; Mansell, 2016).

The findings of the OECD-PISA (2013) for the Department for Education (DfE; 2014b) suggest:

Four areas in which school autonomy can be achieved: staffing, budgeting, student policies, curriculum and assessment. In each area, a school's authority to make decisions can vary. (OECD-PISA in Focus, 2011; DfE;2014b)

whilst Cheng and Mok (2007) observe:

Schools in different education systems are often given different levels of autonomy in each area of decision making, and the extent to which this autonomy is used by schools may also vary within education systems. Some schools report an extensive use of internal autonomy, whereas others report little or no use of their autonomy. (Cheng and Mok, 2007:179)

This reflects the findings of Hofstede (1984) in that the level of autonomy advocated has to reflect that already evident in wider society, whilst Hanushek et al. (2011) find a positive correlation between autonomy and student performance in high-performing systems and the opposite in low-performing ones.

Cheng et al. (2016) suggest a re-conceptualisation of traditional research by incorporating multi-level internal autonomy, differentiated by individual, group and organisation. By linking this to leadership, pedagogy and student learning, the connections between internal autonomy and school improvement can be strengthened. Cheng et al. (2016:181) identify a second limitation of traditional research - 'ignorance of internal structural autonomy and cultural autonomy.' By re-conceptualising this as, 'comprehensive school autonomy', functional and structural autonomy can be aligned with the cultural practices of vision, belief, collaboration and partnership. This then avoids the common problem of much research - an unduly narrow focus on areas such as staffing, budgets and assessments. In their opinion, traditional

research focuses almost exclusively on the perceptions of Principals to the detriment of other stakeholders' views. For Cheng et al. (2016:192), by adopting a 'holistic case-study strategy', we can, 'explore the interrelationships between the key components of and factors involved in school autonomy, leadership, performance, national frameworks/policies, school context and national-education context and determine their contribution to students' learning in selected case-study schools.' However, whilst this strategy would enable researchers to investigate the complexity of these relationships, both in depth and holistically, and possibly offer insights into the complexities of school autonomy, it is likely the generalisability of such research would be limited by the small sample of schools that could be studied.

2.3.4 Operational and Professional Autonomy

In the 1970s and early 1980s, there was a significant degree of freedom and independence for teachers. There was no appraisal, no national inspectorate, no standardised assessment and no performance targets. Paradoxically, however, schools had less discretion in areas such as staffing, resourcing and finance - it is *where* autonomy can be exercised that has changed. The introduction of the National Curriculum standardised what was taught, and established performance criteria whereby all state schools could be judged against the same outcomes, with additional policing and regulation taking place through Ofsted (Keddie, 2015). Teachers were given little discretion over what to teach, or when, with professional autonomy severely curtailed; Caldwell (2008:238-239) seeing this as an inevitable contradiction of combining centralisation and decentralisation agendas. Both the DfE and OECD agree that autonomy must be combined with accountability to be effective (DfE; 2014; OECD; 2011; 2013). The challenge, however, is how to design accountability systems that incentivise school improvement efforts without hindering freedom and autonomy (Dunford, 2012; Greany and Waterhouse, 2016). This tension was reflected in the Department for Education's TALIS research report (DfE; 2014) which found that, 'English

Headteachers clearly have more autonomy than Heads in many other countries and yet they are also the more likely to identify excessive government regulation as a barrier' (DfE; 2014b:75).

For Whitty (2008) and Caldwell (2016), autonomy is largely illusory. With the state determining how schools are measured, and what constitutes success, autonomy is only realised by trying to meet these goals, goals which by the very act of trying to meet them, prevents schools from acting autonomously. For Keddie (2015:4), 'This move to independence and "freedom" is ... contained and constrained by the competition of the standards and audit culture undermining teacher autonomy and professionalism through generating a climate 'of surveillance and mistrust' (Keddie, 2015:8). The OECD (2010) comments on the importance of curricula and assessment decisions being made at school level if student achievement is to rise but such an approach takes away central control and the ability to rank schools according to their performance. As Mansell (2016) puts it:

The important questions in relation to this [autonomy] are: to what extent academy status is translating into meaningful autonomy for individual schools; in relation to which aspects of school provision is autonomy being provided by the academies policy; whether greater autonomy in these aspects should be seen as beneficial to England's education system as a whole and to the pupils being educated within it; and what the evidence says about the benefits or otherwise of school autonomy.
(Mansell, 2016:6-7)

Greany and Waterhouse (2016) memorably described the years 2010-2013 as the 'wild west' of academy growth as 40% of England's secondary schools converted to academy status during this period. Unbridled by local educational authorities, and with few financial checks and balances, academies were probably at their most autonomous. Whilst the role of RSCs is explored in more detail in Section 2.4, their introduction, in 2014, remains central to the autonomy debate. The presence of this new oversight system, with responsibility for monitoring performance, prescribing intervention, and taking decisions on the creation of new academies, reflects the ongoing

tension between centralised control and local decision-making. Of particular significance is the power of RSCs to transfer schools between academy trusts without any transparent decision-making process. This is evidenced through academized schools having the supposed 'freedom' to make their own decisions whilst, in reality, if the RSC intervenes any 'freedoms' cease to exist (Mansell, 2016; Boyask, 2018; Greany and Higham, 2018; Simkins et al., 2019; Simon et al., 2019). This is particularly the case for school takeovers, where a maintained or academy school can be forced to take on a sponsor or be transferred between sponsors. Mansell (2016) identifies 21 schools that transferred between academy sponsors in the first four months of 2015 alone stating:

*Transfers of schools between academy trusts are subject to discussions between those trusts and Regional Schools Commissioners, Head Teacher Boards, DfE, civil servants and ministers, although even the precise details of the decision-makers in each case must remain obscure, as no details are published. The system of transfer of schools is not even subject to having to follow a publicly agreed framework of rules.
(Mansell, 2016:23-24)*

2.3.5 Every School an Academy and Every School Part of a MAT?

The 2016 White Paper '*Educational Excellence Everywhere*' returned to the themes of autonomy and central control. The plan, before its withdrawal by government, required all primary and secondary schools to become academies by 2022 and to join within MATs. Once again this was presented as a significant devolution of operational authority to frontline professionals. Whilst Ladd and Fiske (2016:9) point out, 'Local authorities would no longer have responsibilities for any maintained schools, signifying that government has little confidence in these local governing authorities to promote high-quality education throughout the country', it could also be argued that this claimed 'lack of confidence' emanated more from ideological reasons than educational ones. Ladd and Fiske (2016:23) conclude that, 'while some local authorities are decidedly weak, it is hard to make the case that the basic system of local authorities is failing' with Jensen et al.'s (2013)

comprehensive review of both within, and cross-country, quantitative outcomes, demonstrating that any direct gain in school performance, produced by increasing autonomy, is relatively small. It is difficult, therefore, to escape the conclusion that the preoccupation with academies and MATs from 2010 onwards was as much about breaking the dominance of local education authorities, and introducing a free market ideology, as it was about improving educational standards (Wilkins, 2017; Boyask, 2018). This theory is explored later in this chapter.

The 2016 White Paper also acknowledges that in order for MATs and academies to operate efficiently, and to serve wider public interests, they need the support and monitoring of additional structures. It calls for a wider remit for RSCs, including finding sponsors for struggling schools and school improvement support for the growing number of MATs. As Ladd and Fiske (2016) conclude:

*In sum, while a major goal of the white paper is to promote school autonomy, it also tries to address the most obvious limits of that autonomy. It recognizes that most schools need some sort of professional backup in order to perform at high levels, that some sort of system is needed to identify and support failing schools, and that the collective needs of all children within the local community cannot be met by schools and MATs acting only in their own interests.
(Ladd and Fiske, 2016:9)*

What is not said is that Local Authorities had previously provided many of these services.

2.3.6 Master and/or Servant?

In any discussion of autonomy, it is also interesting to look at the different agencies that have oversight of schools within an academized system and how this compares to the pre-academized world. Are schools really now more autonomous or do they just have different masters? For a standalone academy, in 2020, oversight of performance and standards is provided by the RSC's office, whilst Ofsted also has an inspection function. The ESFA has a role

in monitoring financial management and governance, whilst ensuring compliance with funding agreements. The LA is also involved with responsibility for safeguarding, school placement planning and special educational needs (SEN). Finally, there are governing bodies and academy trusts whose remit involves monitoring all aspects of an academy's work, employing the staff and owning any land and buildings. By contrast, for a maintained school in 2020, oversight consists of the same arrangements in terms of the governing body, but without a trust or sponsor. The LA retains its safeguarding responsibility, is the employer of staff and the owner of land and has a greater role in terms of school improvement. The role of Ofsted remains the same.

In terms of oversight and interventionist powers, the academy sector does not appear to operate with significantly more autonomy than the maintained one, especially as dwindling resources have reduced LAs' capacity to support and challenge. Glatter (2012:704) coined the phrase 'autonomy around the edges' adding that, '...despite the persistent and growing emphasis on autonomy most school practitioners consider themselves constrained by government regulations to an extent that is undoubtedly far greater than their forbearers thirty or forty years ago' (Glatter, 2012:411-412).

In an article looking at the changing policy landscape in England, Higham and Earley (2013) asked school leaders how they, themselves, perceived autonomy and how big a driver it was in their decision to become an academy. Interestingly, whereas 97% of academy principals questioned were positive about autonomy, only 50% of maintained Headteachers shared this enthusiasm; Higham and Earley (2013:707) concluding, 'For most, autonomy was not a primary driver and often appeared imprecise or uncertain.' In their study, maintained school headteachers also identified their own increasingly autonomous working environment caused by the demise of LA support services and felt that a direct relationship with government would lead to greater oversight and intervention, 'Indeed, for many case study and interview participants, external changes to the LA and its capacity to continue

to deliver services, rather than the purposeful use of school autonomy in procurement, appeared to be a significant driver of change....' (Higham and Earley, 2013:711).

2.3.7 Do Schools Use Their Autonomy?

Evidence suggests academies are only making limited use of the 'freedoms' available (Pearson/RSA; 2013; Cirin, 2014; HofCESC; 2015; Mansell, 2016; Salokangas and Ainscow, 2018). According to Cirin (2014), only 14% of the post-2010 academies had changed or planned to change the length of the school day and only 9% their school terms. 16% had hired unqualified teachers but this figure stood at 12% pre-2010. More than 50% of those who converted in 2010-2012 changed their curriculum, but that figure was below 50% for those schools who changed status after 2012. Of the 477 respondents interviewed, in the Pearson/RSA (2013) report, similar levels of curriculum innovation were reported, regardless of a school's status. The House of Commons Education Select Committee report entitled '*Academies and Free Schools*' quoted the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT; 2012) conclusion that:

*Those schools that do use the freedoms they have gained are often those that perform most highly and are most successful in closing the gap. It is therefore imperative that academies are encouraged where appropriate to use their freedoms and do not feel constrained by accountability measures.
(SSAT; 2012, cited in HofCESC; 2015)*

No evidence was provided to support this finding. The report suggests, '...one of the most widely used and important - is the freedom to vary the curriculum (whilst still being required to offer a broad and balanced curriculum to all pupils)' (HofCESC; 2015:24). In reality, however, any opportunity for schools to innovate and tailor their curriculum is heavily constrained by the accountability measures already discussed. By having such a rigid set of national performance indicators it is unsurprising that schools are not innovating. Salokangas and Ainscow (2018:83), in their ten-year study of Parkside Academy concluding, 'that pressures created by national

accountability measures, as they have been interpreted by the school's sponsoring organisation, left little space for experimentation to take place.'

2.3.8 MATs and Centralised Control

Wilkins (2017:2) looked at the structures of large MATs compared to LAs, concluding that, 'the existence of large MATs suggests something qualitatively different since it undermines rather than enhances school autonomy, and reproduces the same kind of legal-bureaucratic arrangements practised by local government.' Wilkins (2017:7) goes on to say that, 'Ironically, and somewhat paradoxically, the monopoly exercised through large MATs enables central government greater steering of schools formerly managed by local government.' A weakness of Wilkins' (2017:7) approach is that he only considers larger MATs and his assertion that they favour, '...the generation of sameness or equivalence to maintain a homogenous, almost predictable and calculable set of interests, positions and practices amongst its schools' is certainly not true of all Trusts, many of whom actively promote the individuality of each school. However, his research does raise some interesting questions. With the BoD overseeing all Trust schools within a MAT, and able to increase or reduce autonomy with every revision of the scheme of delegation, it is relatively easy for centralised control to be exercised even over the most autonomous of schools; Greany and Higham (2018:18) noting how, '...current reforms were seen to be moving the system away from the original promise of increased school autonomy and towards a model of MATs in which school-level autonomy is reduced.' Rayner et al. (2018:156) agrees identifying how, 'The rhetoric about freedom from LA control is countered by the fact that membership of a MAT entails new controls and accountabilities.' Within this new system, the role of the Headteacher has changed (Lewis and Murphy, 2008; Fellows et al., 2019) with many now operating with little discretion and reduced authority. As Simon et al. (2019: 13) put it, '...through the growth of MATs, the autonomy promised to academy headteachers was in reality transferred substantively to the MAT board and the CEO.' With autonomy bequeathed at the discretion of the centre, rather than existing as a fundamental right, a paradox can be

created whereby academies have less autonomy than maintained schools (Curtis et al., 2008; HofCESC; 2015; Mansell, 2016; Salokangas and Ainscow, 2018; Rayner et al., 2018; Simon et al., 2019). This is even more ironic considering that a key justification for the academies' programme was to devolve decision-making to frontline professionals.

The same criticisms of LAs can therefore be directed at MATs with some evidence that MATs are simply replicating the features of local authorities.

As Mansell (2016) concludes:

That is, such autonomy as there is operates at the overarching trust level, rather than at the school level. Schools within such a framework may well find that an overarching academy trust enjoys more power or control than that experienced by a local authority in a maintained school set-up.
(Mansell, 2016:20)

It would be ironic if the autonomy and innovation that the Coalition government claimed would lead to 'greatness being unleashed' (Academies Act, 2010) were hindered by the very MAT structures intended as their catalyst.

2.3.9 Summary

Tensions between autonomy and centralised control have existed in the English education system since the introduction of state education in 1944. Historically, schools were controlled by local educational authorities who oversaw all aspects of school life. Reforms from 1988 onwards gave schools greater control over certain areas, such as finance and buildings, but less autonomy over others, such as assessment and curriculum. The 1988 ERA saw the introduction of LMS, whilst GM status enabled schools to directly employ staff, own land and buildings, and side-step local accountabilities. Paradoxically, however, at the same time, the introduction of the National Curriculum, and its related set of national assessment accountabilities, alongside the formation of the schools' inspectorate, Ofsted, meant schools were governed in terms of outputs more tightly than ever before, '...the classic

unstable mix of freedom for schools and surveillance over them - a version of autonomy and responsibility' (Ball, 2011:6).

The restoration of GM schools to local oversight by Labour in 1998 only partially restored the balance as Foundation schools continued to operate semi-autonomously. The introduction of academies, in 2002, created the first schools financially independent of LA control. These first academies really did enjoy a high level of autonomy, being subject to different inspection requirements, whilst being able to select admissions and set their own pay and conditions. Their numbers were low, however, and they were almost exclusively situated in areas of high deprivation. The Academies Act (2010), and the years between 2010 and 2013, probably offered schools the best opportunity to maximise their autonomy. Whilst schools were still subject to Ofsted inspections, and accountability league table pressures, there was no local dimension to monitor and challenge.

From 2014 onwards, this autonomy was gradually eroded. RSCs were introduced and curriculum changes that curtailed the range of options a school could offer. Funding agreements were also adjusted as academy chains expanded to ensure a model set of key provisions and to reduce any element of variance. Further expansion was then predicated on adopting these new articles, which substantially increased the interventionist powers of the Secretary of State. At the same time, schools were encouraged towards MAT structures, the idea being that a MAT could offer school improvement services, economies of scale and professional development opportunities that were not possible for standalone academies. However, there were risks. Academies surrender a good deal of independence when they join a MAT as the decision is irrevocable and they no longer operate as separate legal entities (Ladd and Fiske, 2016; Mansell, 2016; Breslin, 2018; Glatter, 2018; Rayner et al., 2018).

Ironically, the very things that attracted people in the first place to the academy and MAT model - greater autonomy and greater innovation - appear

under threat as MATs look to emulate LAs and increasingly dictate systems, policies and procedures from the centre (Wolfe, 2013; Ladd and Fiske, 2016; Mansell, 2016; Breslin, 2018; Rayner et al., 2018; Fellows et al., 2019). Furthermore, these constraints are not always made clear to schools when they join MATs, with Local Governing Bodies (LGBs) often unaware of their restricted autonomy and reduced duties and powers (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, HofCPAC; 2015; Breslin, 2018; Fellows et al., 2019). This can then lead to role ambiguity, role confusion and unclear accountability.

2.4 Local Education Authorities Revisited?

The consequence of the decline of local authorities, in the context of compelling performance pressure on schools, has been the growth of various forms of partnerships among schools, partly spontaneous, partly engineered by government school improvement policies such as federations with executive heads, Teaching School Alliances and forced academization into sponsored chains. In contrast, three years after the white paper it is evident that government regards the role of local authorities in school improvement as in practice largely insignificant.... (Hatcher, 2014:355)

2.4.1 A Brief History of Local Education Authorities and their Relationship with Schools

Early Years and Post-War Consensus

The committee known as a *local education authority* was first introduced in the 1902 Education Act holding power and responsibility over school admissions, school places and the location of new provision. By 1906, the LEA role expanded further with responsibility for free school meals and medical inspections. Commenting on this time, Barber (2015, cited in Greany, 2016) talks of trust and altruism following the passing of the 1944 Education Act, with close collaboration between the Ministry, LEAs and teaching profession. By the end of the 1960s, the scope of LEA autonomy and discretion had increased with Tomlinson (1993) noting:

Consider any catalogue of significant educational development in this country this century and I suspect you will find LEA involvement - often an LEA initiative - even though for much of that time broad curriculum policies were centrally directed or were much influenced by public examinations subject to central direction. (Tomlinson, 1993:147)

The 1980s - From Local to Central Control

Under Conservative administrations in the 1980s, motivation in regard to changing the role and influence of local educational authorities was, in part, political. For Gillard (2011:2), ‘...the twin aims of Margaret Thatcher’s education policies in the 1980s were to convert the nation’s schools system from a public service into a market, and to transfer power from local authorities to central government.’ The education system was seen as failing and unable to deliver the educated and skilled workforce the government demanded; local authorities being regarded as complicit in this failure and unwilling to challenge the dominance of the teaching unions.

The 1980 Local Government Planning and Land (No. 2) Act enabled central government to control the amount of grant-related expenditure each LEA could spend, with specific grants directed towards government priorities. This reduced the spending discretion of local education authorities. Of particular importance was the ERA (1998). As Simpson (1998) puts it:

Through the grant-maintained option and City Technology Colleges, the LEA monopoly was broken. A diversity of schools was encouraged. The ERA resulted in a fundamental restriction on the powers of LEAs to manage the education service both because central government acquired greater control, and because financial control was transferred to school governing bodies through LMS and the creation of Grant-Maintained schools.

(Simpson, 1998:19)

The 1990s to 2000s - From School Administration to School Improvement

Under the Labour government of 1997 to 2010, local educational authorities experienced a partial renaissance. Former GM schools were placed under the LA umbrella with the Funding Agency for Schools abolished and parity restored to funding. As Fletcher-Campbell and Lee (2003:1) wrote, ‘Local Educational Authorities [are] central to the realisation of the government’s education agenda, securing the effective local administration of national policies, priorities and procedures.’ In 1997, the DfEE defined the role of LEAs

as challenging schools to raise standards of achievement, to provide clear performance data, offer educational services and provide targeted support to under-performing schools, to co-ordinate the local implementation of national strategies and to collaborate nationally with central government. These last two requirements were particularly interesting: local education authorities would be given a role in implementing school improvement strategies, but these strategies would be designed and led by central government. Whilst local government always had a seat at the table, it remained, under Labour, not a fully trusted partner.

From 2010 to the Present Day - A Dispensable Partner

The 2010 White Paper, *'The Importance of Teaching'*, envisaged the future as a self-improving school system of locally autonomous schools. In this new world, LAs would have, 'a strong strategic role as champions for parents, families and vulnerable pupils. They will promote educational excellence by ensuring a good supply of high-quality places, coordinating admissions and developing their school improvement strategies to support local schools' (DfE; 2010c: para.16). According to Hill (2012), the LAs' role was simply changing, not diminishing, with new powers in relation to children's well-being, commissioning places and organising post-16 provision. Hatcher (2014:355) disagreed, pointing to a 33% cut in LA budgets between 2010 and 2014 and claiming, 'government policy in the three years since the white paper has been directed at creating a self-improving school system and eroding the capacity of LAs to implement school improvement strategies.'

Sandals and Bryant (2014:4) found only positives in this new world. Their study followed ten local education systems, '...selected to ensure our study covered a range of geographical areas, different LA structures, sizes political control, system performance (measured by Ofsted inspection outcomes), and school types and phases.' In reality, however, of the ten education authorities canvassed, eight were Conservative controlled. For Sandals and Bryant (2014:16), school leaders welcomed the opportunity to lead school

improvement with their report claiming a, ‘broad consensus about the desirability of creating a self-improving school system in England....’ As the Sandals and Bryant (2014) report was commissioned by the DfE, it is perhaps unsurprising it portrays the changing role of the LA, and support for the new educational landscape, in such a positive light. This was by no means a consensus view, however. Concerns about the removal of the protection of the LA, the development of a fragmented, disorganised system, and the threat to collaborative practices were also highlighted (Pritchard and Crossley-Holland, 2012; Smith and Abbott, 2014; Greany and Higham, 2018), with concerns expressed over the capacity of system-leading schools to support those deemed as under-performing.

2.4.2 The Missing Middle

Bubb et al. (2019:13) define the middle tier as, ‘the systems of support and accountability connecting publicly-funded LA maintained schools and academies with the DfE.’ For schools that converted to academy status between the years 2010 to 2013, there was no middle tier. As Dunford (2012:1) puts it, ‘The future role of LAs in education, the shape of the new middle tier between central government and individual schools, and the way that school improvement is organised are all in a state of flux.’ The debate over whether a middle tier was needed, and what form it should take, was a fertile one. According to Muir (2012):

Ministers are complacent about this problem because they believe that competition and choice will largely drive improvements in schools, meaning that ministerial intervention can be limited to a handful of egregious cases. This belief is misplaced: while managed competition has a role in improving public services, in schools it has a mixed record.
(Muir, 2012:1)

The majority of high-performing school systems across the world have a middle tier operating between central government and schools (McKinsey, 2012; Bubb et al., 2019). This ‘middle tier’ has a variety of functions, including providing targeted support to schools, joining up services, acting as an

intermediary for central government, and involving local people (Muir, 2012; Thraves et al., 2012; HofCESC; 2015). Towards the end of 2012, and with a record number of schools converting to academy status, a consensus began to emerge that a middle tier was necessary. The debate then shifted to what this middle tier should look, who should occupy it, and what it should do.

Dunford (2012) identified six options for the middle tier. The first involved regional commissioners, appointed by LAs, overseeing the needs of all pupils within a locality and with the power to direct school improvement and intervention. The second consisted of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs), operating separately from LAs and academies, and monitoring the performance of all schools. The advantages of such an approach would be the independence and expertise they could bring, the disadvantages how school improvement would be brokered and commissioned. Dunford's (2012:2) third option was for chains of schools and teaching alliances to take responsibility for school improvement, although he acknowledges the difficulties of obtaining national coverage with such a model. The fourth and fifth options involved LAs, working alongside outstanding Headteachers to direct school improvement provision. Whilst local knowledge, and connections to other services, were seen as a strength of this approach, Dunford (2012:7) acknowledges that in the current academies' climate there may well not be, '...the will or the imagination to create such a system.' His final option was for a mixture of chains, teaching schools and national or local structures, comprising different providers, supporting schools as and when necessary but admits the result would be, 'a somewhat chaotic situation that leaves huge gaps in the school improvement system.'

One of the weaknesses of Dunford's (2012) research is that he only considers the middle tier in terms of school improvement. In reality, it would be expected to fulfil a much wider remit. Hill (2012:39) presents a 'conceptual model' that outlines the different responsibilities that would be fulfilled nationally, by a new middle tier of local commissioners, by a LA and by school clusters. Using the example of commissioning school places, Hill (2012:39-

41) divides the middle tier role into four areas: strategy, regulatory, scrutiny/support and intervention. However, even in this model, there is a significant degree of overlap between commissioner and LA roles, questioning whether both bodies are needed. In a 2014 report entitled, '*Academies and maintained schools: Oversight and intervention*', the Audit Commission notes that, 'The increasing diversity of the school system has meant significant changes to oversight bodies' responsibilities and the introduction of new bodies (academy trusts and sponsors)' (National Audit Office, NAO; 2014:4), before concluding, 'The Department should...set out the responsibilities and accountabilities of oversight bodies, and how they interact with schools' own responsibilities' (NAO; 2014:11). Inevitably, however, the creation of these new bodies has impacted upon schools' autonomy and increased their accountabilities.

2.4.3 A New 'Middle Tier'? - Regional Schools Commissioners

According to Hill (2015:1), 'The advent of RSCs was a recognition by the Department for Education that it was unrealistic to centrally monitor, manage and, where necessary, intervene in all academies and academy trusts as the numbers continued to grow.' In the House of Commons Education Select Committee (HofCESC; 2016:8) report entitled, '*The Role of Regional Schools Commissioners*', the responsibilities of each RSC were defined as: monitoring academies' performance, taking action when there is under-achievement, approving the conversion of maintained schools to academies and selecting sponsors for new free schools. RSCs were also expected to encourage organisations to become academy sponsors, build greater capacity in the system and approve changes to existing academies. These responsibilities are different from those originally envisaged by Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, when he announced the formation of RSCs in 2012:

This will not be a new "middle tier" of oversight. Instead my vision is of autonomous groups of schools, deregulated as far as possible, competing for pupils, collaborating on school improvement and operating within a new, more prescriptive set of curriculum and

*assessment requirements and standards, all policed by Ofsted.
(Gove, cited in Crossley-Holland, 2017)*

From July 1st, 2015, RSCs also took on responsibility for identifying under-performing LA schools and matching them with an appropriate sponsor. RSCs have no role in relation to academies that are performing well, and are not responsible for school improvement activities instead commissioning support from other bodies. There is less transparency than in the previous LA model with no requirement for RSCs to have a locally agreed school improvement strategy, or public protocol of community engagement.

2.4.4 A 'Democratic Deficit'?

The Academies Commission in a 2013 report concluded that RSCs risked creating an additional layer of bureaucracy and a “democratic deficit” (Pearson/RSA; 2013:93). Dunford (2012) was also concerned that a system of nationally appointed commissioners would fail to recognise or respond to local needs, aspirations and sensitivities. To partly address this, each RSC is supported by a local Headteacher Board (HTB) who advise on decisions regarding academy applications. Comprising eight members, the four Headteachers on these Boards are elected by their peers. However, they only make up half of the Board numbers as the remaining members are appointed by the RSC/Secretary of State or co-opted. Unlike with the previous LA system, there is no place for local stakeholders. Rogers (2012) in a report entitled, *'Filling the Gap: The Championing Role of English Councils in Education'* claims local education authorities have a:

*...unique, democratically mandated, leadership role to create, in partnership with schools and the communities they serve, a compelling narrative that describes a shared commitment to high aspiration and achievement, equality of opportunity and access to education, and an expectation of lifelong learning.
(Rogers, 2012:5)*

This is a major difference to RSCs who have no local accountabilities. Instead the academies' programme remains a centrally directed government-

controlled system that is administered locally (Pring, 2013; Rayner et al., 2018; West and Wolfe, 2018).

As Hatcher (2014) concludes:

The exclusionary managerial composition of the new partnership raises a fundamental issue of principle concerning education policy at the local level: what should be the legitimate roles in policy decision making in the local school system of elected local government and of parents and other stakeholders, including teachers and communities?
(Hatcher, 2014:7)

Headteacher Boards have received particular criticism. As the 2016, House of Commons report concludes, 'There is currently confusion about the role of Headteacher Boards, including whether they are decision-making bodies or purely a source of advice for the RSC' (HofC; 2016:51). It goes onto say, 'There is a paucity of useful information available online about the work of Headteacher Boards, and this undermines a promising component of the RSC system' (HofC; 2016:53). Whereas LAs were required to publish decision-making protocols and frameworks, alongside detailed minutes of discussions, there is no such requirement for RSCs. McInerney (2017:10), in an article for SchoolsWeek, adds, 'Headteacher boards are the most baffling and stupid part of the schools system. They are also corrupt, self-serving and secretive.' She points to the fact that eligibility to stand is only allowed for Headteachers of outstanding schools, that 50% of the members of each board are not democratically elected and decision-making takes place behind closed doors. For Crossley-Holland (2017:19), 'The schools commissioners have morphed into a privileged, parallel middle tier with no discussion on role or accountability.' He contrasts their increasing budgets (£4.7 million in 2015/16 to £26.3 million in 2016/17), to the declining funding for local authorities before concluding, 'Are there any precedents in other advanced education systems for this strategy, which might need to run for many years, in which there are two middle tiers, one of which is deliberately neglected?' (Crossley-Holland, 2017:19).

Partly because of their newness, and partly because of the difficulty in obtaining information, very little research has been undertaken into the effectiveness and impact of RSCs - the 2016 House of Commons Education Select Committee report remaining one of the few in-depth studies. Despite being limited in scope, (there were only forty written submissions, one LA interview and no sampling rationale behind the selection of Headteachers), the report offers an interesting insight into the difficulties of introducing a new 'middle tier' into the educational landscape. One of these difficulties is the lack of meaningful measures to judge impact, 'It is troubling that the DfE struggled to provide us with data on the performance of RSCs, given that KPIs were referred to throughout our inquiry and the department's written evidence' (HofCESC; 2016:52). Robertson (2017), in an article for SchoolsWeek, revealed that four of the nine KPIs for RSCs were based around increasing the number of academies and sponsors within a region, rather than improving standards. This stands in marked contrast to the 'educator-led middle tier', focused on excellence and equity, identified by Bubb et al. (2019) as fundamental to the world's highest-performing educating systems.

2.4.5 'Too Many Cooks?' - The Newly Crowded Middle Tier

Prior to the Academies Act (2010), there were only three main players in the middle tier: Local Authorities, Governing Bodies and Ofsted. Alongside RSCs, these have now been joined by the Education and Skills Funding Agency, Teaching Schools and Academy Trusts. Each of these will now be considered:

Cook 1: Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA)

The role of the ESFA is to monitor an academy's compliance with its funding agreement and ensure appropriate financial management and governance in accordance with the Academies Financial Handbook. The ESFA also oversees elements of safeguarding within academy settings, the administration and handling of complaints and the level of executive salaries and pay awards.

Cook 2: Teaching Schools

The RSCs and ESFA are not the only new arrivals on the scene. 835 teaching schools were designated by 2018. Working with an alliance of local schools and other partners, such as universities, these play a role in recruiting and training teachers, undertaking research and coordinating school improvement. According to Sandals and Bryant (2014:17), 'Teaching schools are seen as having enormous potential to drive school improvement by building leadership capacity, commissioning outreach work and brokering school-to-school support.' However, other research has been less convinced of teaching schools' effectiveness with concerns surrounding geographical coverage, capacity, financial sustainability and leadership continuity (Pritchard and Crossley-Holland, 2012; Thraves et al., 2012; Gu et al., 2014). In April 2020, these concerns were recognised by the government with Teaching Schools abolished and Teaching Hubs introduced in their place.

Cook 3: Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs)

Dunford (2012:2) claims, '...the headquarters of the chain has become the new middle tier' with groups of schools now tasked to improve other schools. For Hill et al. (2012), the most successful chains have a clearly developed school improvement model, the ability to move staff across institutions, enhanced capacity through joint-practice development and rigorous quality assurance. For Wilkins (2017:11), changing the middle tier is about making schools more responsive to central government under the illusion of granting them more control and autonomy, 'MATs are therefore complementary and supplementary to the will of government in that they work to align micro-politics of schools with the political and economic aspirations of the state.' The House of Commons Education Select Committee report on '*Academies and Free Schools*' however, puts an opposing view:

Whereas there were few if any alternatives to local authority oversight in the past, now a weak education authority knows that it must improve or lose schools Too often in the past the democratic mandate of local authorities acted as a protective cloak for failings and excused slow or inadequate intervention. (HofCESC; 2015:64)

This statement, however, fails to acknowledge that 'losing schools' is outside of an LA's control anyway.

Cook 4: Ofsted

The role of Ofsted within the middle tier has not changed significantly in the last twenty years. Other than the timing of inspections, and changing inspection frameworks, academies and maintained schools have been treated the same. The inspection, or otherwise, of MATs provoked an exchange of views in 2016 between then HMCI, Sir Michael Wilshaw, and then Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, with a compromise finally being reached whereby groups of schools within a MAT would be inspected but no judgements made on the MAT itself. It appeared to many that the government's preferred structure was escaping scrutiny, with the HofCESC (2017:11) noting, 'There is a gap in assessing MATs which neither Ofsted nor RSCs presently fulfil. The current situation of Ofsted conducting 'batched inspections' is not sustainable or sufficient as MATs expand over the next five to six years.'

2.4.6 A 'Middle' or a 'Muddle'?

Writing before the introduction of RSCs, Dunford (2012:1) describes school oversight structures as 'creative chaos'. For Bates (2013:328), 'As a consequence ... the local - the area between central government and schools - becomes a space in which different forms of middle tier (LAs, chains, clusters and so on) evolve and interact.' Bubb et al. (2019:9) examine the 'middle tier' in four of the world's highest-performing educational systems - Singapore, Finland, Estonia and Ontario before concluding, 'In England, in contrast, we found that the current system was a "muddle".' In their research, they produce a useful visual oversight of this 'muddle' (reproduced below), and where different responsibilities lie.

Table 2.1 Which main organisations provided middle tier functions

Finance	Accountability	Access	People
Allocating finances - ESFA, LA, MAT Accounting - ESFA, LA, MAT Financial monitoring - ESFA, LA, MAT, Dioceses Finance returns - ESFA, LA, MAT Intervening in financial issues - ESFA, LA, Diocese Audit - LA, MAT Allocating grants - ESFA Bidding for grants - LA, MAT	Monitoring standards - RSC, LA, Dioceses, MAT School improvement - NCTL, LA, MAT, Complaints - LA, ESFA, Dioceses External Reviews - ESFA, RSC, LA, MAT, Dioceses Governance support - LA, MAT, NCTL, Dioceses Intervention - LA, RSC, Dioceses Liaison with DfE agencies - MAT, LA, Diocese	Admissions & appeals - LA, MAT, Dioceses Curriculum - MAT, LA, Dioceses SEN - LA Educational welfare - LA Place planning - LA Buildings & grounds - MAT, LA, Dioceses	Recruitment - NCTL, MAT, LA Training and development - NCTL, MAT, LA Initial teacher training - NCTL NQT induction - NCTL, MAT, LA, Dioceses HR - LA, MAT, Dioceses

(Bubb et al. 2019:21)

Ball (2013:147) talks of ‘heterarchies’, new organisational structures comprising a range of state and non-state policy actors that are now occupying the middle tier. With no published division of responsibilities between these oversight bodies, and competition for control of local and national educational policy, ambiguity and confusion often result; Rayner et al. (2018:155) referencing the, ‘complex network of tensions and contradictions in the ongoing redesign of the system of provision.’ The HofCESC (2016) report on the work of Regional Schools Commissioners recommended that:

The government should clarify the division of responsibilities between RSCs, local authorities, and Ofsted - including in relation to safeguarding - in a way that is comprehensible to schools and parents [and] should publish a protocol for interaction between RSCs and local authorities to ensure there is a shared understanding of roles. This should also set out expectations for information sharing between RSCs, local authorities and MATs.
 (HofCESC; 2016:53)

Safeguarding provides a particularly pertinent example of this confusion. Local authorities do not have investigative powers over academies nor any enforcement actions if an academy is in breach of safeguarding requirements. This is despite local authorities holding the overall responsibility for the safeguarding of pupils in all schools, whether maintained and academy. All a local authority can do is refer the matter to Ofsted who will then decide whether or not to carry out an inspection based on the information provided. However, Ofsted can only look at a school's overall safeguarding policies and practices - they have no authority to investigate individual cases. This means, regardless of what they find, all Ofsted can do is judge safeguarding 'effective' or 'not effective' and then refer the matter to the ESFA. The ESFA would then have to conduct its own investigation to see whether the school was in breach of the safeguarding obligations within its funding agreement. Even then, if the school was found to be in breach, and the matter involved a member of staff, it would have to be referred back to the academy trust to investigate and take action as they are the employer. Furthermore, there is no mechanism for informing the RSC, the local authority or the community of the outcome and resolution of any concerns, despite this being a key recommendation of the House of Commons Education Select Committee (2015) report on *'Academies and Free Schools'* (HofCESC; 2015:34).

For supposedly autonomous schools, facing investigations from three different bodies over the same incident, this could well appear as a high degree of centralised control with no overall coordination. Compare this with the situation for a maintained school, whereby the local authority would conduct the investigation and, as the employer, take any required disciplinary action, only informing Ofsted if they felt safeguarding was ineffective across the whole school. In their 2015 report on *'School oversight and intervention'*, the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts described the current education system as 'complex' with different bodies discharging their functions in different ways:

The Department has increased the autonomy of schools and oversight bodies. It has done so without an overall strategy, leading

to confusion about the roles and responsibilities of the Department, the Agency, local authorities and academy sponsors, and allowing schools to fall through gaps in the system.
(HofCPAC; 2015:4)

Similar concerns were expressed in the House of Commons Education Select Committee's *'Academies and Free Schools'* report, 'the DfE, as a matter of urgency, [should] clarify the respective role of local authorities and RSCs in relation to academies.' (HofCESC; 2015:34) A school system operating under the supervision of a local authority has built-in advantages when it comes to being responsive to local needs and pressures: it serves a coherent geographical area, can coordinate services across sectors and act as a central point of contact for parental enquiries. As Ladd and Fiske (2016:34) point out, 'The new structure of MATs and RSCs...seriously undermine these mechanisms for responsiveness to local concerns' as they remove the responsibility for many of these functions from local authorities.

2.4.7 Summary

The Public Accounts Committee, in a 2015 report entitled *'School oversight and intervention'*, concludes that the DfE, 'presides over a complex and confused system of external oversight' (HofCPAC; 2015:5). Whilst the diversity of school improvement providers within the middle tier is seen by some as a positive step as it breaks monopolies, (Hill, 2012; Parish, Baxter and Sandals, 2012; Sandals and Bryant, 2014), there is a concern over increased fragmentation and the difficulty of coordinating intelligence and support (Dunford, 2012; Mansell, 2016; Bubb et al., 2019). With so many diverse players occupying the middle ground, each with complementary and sometimes contradictory functions, it is not surprising that the middle tier of education has become difficult for 'autonomous' schools to navigate. Consequently, Bubb et al. (2019:11) recommend, '...an urgent debate about the role of the middle tier, taking account of international best practice, to ensure greater collaboration, clarity of roles and coherence for the benefit of all schools and pupils.' Whilst the introduction of RSCs can be viewed as a pragmatic response to the growing number of academies, the controversy

surrounding Headteacher Boards has led to concerns over transparency and openness. There is also an issue of capacity, with RSCs only able to fulfil some of the functions previously carried out by local authorities. As a result, many schools receive little, if any, monitoring. With the withdrawal of the 2016 Education Act, it seems likely that a two-tier system of LA and RSC oversight will continue. Despite the claims of Dickens (2017), and Crossley-Holland (2017), that RSCs are working as reinvented LAs, this is not borne out by the evidence. Some roles have been replaced, but there is less oversight of schools than previously, with school improvement work subcontracted to a much wider range of bodies.

2.5 Educational and/or Ideological?

2.5.1 Educational Performance of Academies

*The level of complexity and fluidity [in the English school system] has made it notoriously difficult to analyse the impact of academies (and academy chains) on educational outcomes for young people.
(Hutchings et al. 2014:11)*

The House of Commons Education Select Committee (2015) in its ‘*Academies and Free Schools*’ report describes, ‘raising standards of educational achievement’ and ‘closing the achievement gap between rich and poor’ as the two key aims of the academies’ programme (HofCESC; 2015:10). For Mansell (2016:26), this leads to the most important question of all, ‘has the quality of education in our schools improved as a result of the academies’ policy?’. On the surface, this might appear a relatively straightforward question. However, as Sims et al. (2015) point out:

...the overall picture of academy performance is complex. It is difficult to provide a comprehensive assessment owing to differences between:

- *the funding and purpose of early academies (2002-2009) and later academies established from 2010 onwards;*
- *pupil intakes and profile of converter and sponsored academies;*
- *primary and secondary academies;*
- *academies in different academy chains.*

Consequently, it would be simplistic and misleading to draw firm conclusions and make a singular assessment of academies as a whole.

(Sims et al., 2015:1-2)

For Mansell (2016:26), ‘...much of this debate concerns often marginal rates of improvement in national test and/or examination scores in individual schools’ with Eyles et al. (2015) identifying that whilst, ‘...a comparison of ‘sponsored’ academies in both regimes may be relatively legitimate...there is too little overlap between the nature of these academies and the Labour batch to warrant any meaningful extrapolation.’ Briggs and Simons (2014:26-27), in a report for the Policy Exchange, acknowledge this complexity and suggest

research on academies is separated into different elements including: 'Impact of First-Wave Sponsored Academies (2002-2010)'; 'Impact of Second-Wave Sponsored Academies (2010 to present)'; 'Impact of Converter Academies (post 2010)'; and 'Evidence on impact for primary vs secondary.' These distinct 'elements' will structure this section.

2.5.2 Impact of First-Wave Sponsored Academies (2002-2010)

The DfE (2012) report entitled, '*Attainment at Key Stage 4 by Pupils in Academies 2011*' concludes, 'Between 2010 and 2011, results for pupils in Sponsored Academies improved at a faster rate than in other state-funded schools and at a faster rate than in a group of similar schools' (DfE; 2012:2-3). In all comparisons, academies' results improved faster than in similar schools, including for FSM and SEN pupils, 'For those Sponsored Academies that had been open for at least five years, results between 2006 and 2011 increased at a faster rate than for a group of [comparator] schools tracked over the same period' (DfE; 2012:2-3). As a result, according to the DfE (2012:26), 'When comparing like-with-like, the results suggest that Sponsored Academies (once they have had long enough to turn around a school's previous poor performance) are performing better than similar non-Academy schools for pupils overall and for disadvantaged pupils in particular' (DfE; 2012:26). A similarly positive picture was painted by the DfE in its analysis of 2013 performance table information:

In 2013, in secondary sponsored academies, the percentage of pupils achieving five or more good GCSEs rose by 1.8%. As academies mature, they continue to improve. Sponsored academies that have been open for three years have improved by 12% since opening (to 48.2%), compared to a 5% increase in maintained schools over the same period.
(DfE; 2013:12)

These outcomes support the findings of PricewaterhouseCoopers (2003-2008), and the National Audit Office (2008), who found that sponsored academies demonstrated higher levels of pupils' progress than the national average. Machin and Vernoit (2011) developed a statistical model that

compared the results of academies and non-academies by checking the GCSE grade improvements of sponsored academies opened between 2002 and 2009 with those of other schools. Their analysis found that results in academies improved faster than those in a comparable group of schools and that results in neighbouring schools also improved.

Methodological concerns surround what is actually being measured in these studies. All of the reports cited above consider improvements in 'GCSE results or their equivalents' as a key indicator. 'Equivalent' qualifications at the time included BTEC 4 GCSE equivalent PE and Science. By entering pupils for 'equivalence' qualifications, schools could boost their overall attainment and value-added scores significantly through 100% coursework assessed vocational qualifications. The Local Government Association, Worth (2014), and HofCESC (2015:14), in their *'Academies and Free Schools'* report, raised this very concern with the latter commenting, 'This reflects an established trend for sponsored academies to make greater than average use of equivalent qualifications'; the National Foundation for Educational Research (Worth, 2015:4) study, *'Analysis of academy school performance in GCSEs 2013: Final report'* claiming, when equivalent qualifications were excluded from the data, 'Pupil progress in sponsored academies compared to similar non-academies is not significantly different over time.' Worth (2014:28) produced two sets of statistics, with and without equivalents, before concluding, '...changes to the way school league tables were calculated in 2014 have differentially affected the GCSE results of sponsored academies, because of the differential use of equivalent qualifications in sponsored academies compared to similar maintained schools.'

Machin (2012:2-3) expresses concern that, '...translating the evidence from the old programme over to the new, without appropriate reservations about whether the findings can be generalised, is, at the moment, a step too far.' To address those concerns, Andrews and Perera (2017) adopted a new methodology comparing the performance of 152 schools which were sponsored and open as academies before the general election in May 2010,

(the 'treatment' group), with 56 sponsored academies that were approved under the Labour government but opened after May 2010, (the 'control' group). At the beginning of the analysis, both the 'treatment' and 'control' groups featured similar characteristics in terms of pupils' prior attainment at Key Stage 2, outcomes at GCSE, the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM, and those with SEN. This allowed pupils in both sets of schools to be compared. Furthermore, to isolate the effect of academization on outcomes, Andrews and Perera (2017:43) studied changes in Key Stage 4 (KS4) attainment amongst pupils already enrolled in the schools before they became academies, relative to changes in schools that converted in the 2010/2011 school year. By only including pupils who were enrolled in these schools prior to conversion, ('legacy-enrolled children'), in the analysis of KS4 performance, their approach bypassed concerns that academization itself might impact parental choice and, in turn, influence achievement and prejudice results. Their conclusion was that, '...early sponsored academies, which opened under the Labour government between 2002 and 2010, had, on average, a positive effect on pupils' end of secondary school attainment' (Andrews and Perera, 2017:6). Machin and Vernoit (2011) looked at the school years 2001/02 to 2008/09 and compared the outcomes of academy schools to a specific set of comparison schools - state maintained ones that later became academies. Their research paints a similarly encouraging picture of improved attainment. However, despite the methodological robustness of these studies, definite conclusions about improved educational outcomes are hard to reach. This is because changes in examination specifications make like-for-like comparisons difficult. Hutchings et al. (2014) point to:

...a trend for proponents of the academies programme to highlight sponsored academies' faster-than-average improvement (when of course, this is to be expected given that so many academies start at a low base); whereas opponents cite their lower-than-average attainment (when again this is to be expected given their low starting points and pupil demographic). (Hutchings et al., 2014:11-12)

Mansell (2016:27) raises the interesting question that, 'If academies have improved results faster than other schools, does this show that academies are 'better' schools. Or are they simply schools which have become especially focused on results?' Several researchers (Curtis et al., 2008; Machin and Vernoit, 2011; Andrews and Perera, 2017) claim that sponsored academies simply respond to academy conversion by increasing the quality of their pupil intake into Year 7, with Andrews and Perera (2017:6) concluding, '...academies become more attractive to parents of relatively higher attaining pupils than had previously been the case.' As a result, attainment then rises.

2.5.3 Impact of First-Wave Sponsored Academies on Disadvantaged Pupils (2002-2010)

Machin and Silva (2013:11) looked at the impact of sponsored academies on the attainment of pupils at the bottom tail of achievement distribution concluding that, '...it does not seem unreasonable to say that, on balance, the evidence that does exist at best shows only a small beneficial effect on overall pupil performance and very little consistent evidence of improvements for tail students.' The research of Hutchings et al. (2014) also reflects this more variable picture, whilst the Local Government Association (Worth; 2014) in a report entitled, '*Analysis of academy school performance in GCSEs*', concludes, 'The analysis shows the attainment gaps for low and high-ability pupils in sponsored academies and similar maintained schools are very similar. Regression analysis indicates that the differences are not statistically significant' (Worth; 2014:17).

2.5.4 Impact of Second-Wave Sponsored Academies (2010 - to Present)

Andrews and Perera (2017) is one of the few studies to consider the performance of sponsored academies post-2010. Their methodology involves a 'treatment' group of 205 academies that were approved for sponsorship after May 2010 and opened by December 2014. These schools were then compared with a 'control' group of 49 sponsored academies that opened after this period. Focusing on key stage 4 outcomes, only those pupils who took

their GCSEs, or equivalents, by the summer of 2015 were included in the analysis of both 'treatment' and 'control' groups. Similar to first-wave sponsored academies, Andrews and Perera (2017:17), 'observed a positive shift in the prior attainment of incoming pupils after a school became an academy.' As a result, outcomes for pupils who joined academies after conversion could only be considered using the legacy enrolment methodology already discussed. Andrews and Perera (2017:18) found, '...average improvement in Key Stage 4 results rises again to approximately one grade higher in two subjects in the year in which a post-2010 sponsored academy converts.' Differing hypotheses such as pressure from Ofsted, and the appointment of a new Headteacher, are offered by way of possible explanation but the improvement in performance could simply be mean reversion - the statistical tendency of variables to revert to the mean over time. More significantly, '...this comparative improvement then starts to fall over the subsequent three years until it is back to zero by the fourth year of becoming an academy' (Andrews and Perera, 2017:19). In Andrews and Perera's (2017:19) research, because schools in the 'treatment' group start to improve in the year before becoming a sponsored academy, '...it is not possible to determine whether the improvement following academization, or the decline a couple of years later, is due to academization per se.'

As Stewart (2015) puts it:

*To test whether sponsored academies are a vehicle for superior school improvement, the issue is not whether they improve results more than all schools but whether they do better than maintained schools starting from a similar level. That is the question that the government consistently refuses to answer.
(Stewart, 2015)*

2.5.5 Impact of Second-Wave Sponsored Academies on Disadvantaged Pupils (2010 - to Present)

It is difficult to disaggregate the performance of disadvantaged pupils in second-wave sponsored academies as opposed to first-wave sponsored academies because, as Eyles et al. (2015) argue, ‘...the pattern of heterogeneity on the percentage of FSM-eligible pupils enrolled after conversion suggests that ‘sponsored’ academies of the coalition period might still be different from the ‘sponsored’ academies of the Labour years.’ Machin and Silva (2013) studied the GCSE performance of those pupils who spent four years in an academy school and found the benefits were concentrated amongst pupils of high to medium prior attainment and did little to help the lowest achieving pupils; McNally (2015:6) observing how, ‘The differences between pre-2010 and post-2010 academies make extrapolation tricky.’ The (2013) DfE report, ‘*Attainment by pupils in academies 2012: supplementary analysis to the academies report 2011/12*’ states that, ‘sponsored academies do better for the most deprived’, on the basis that, in 2012, ‘the proportion of FSM pupils... achieving five or more (good) GCSEs including English and mathematics was higher (2.4% in sponsored academies and 0.9% in similar LA schools)’ (DfE; 2013: para. 30). Stewart (2013), however, disagrees with the DfE’s conclusions. He compares data from schools with similar proportions of FSM pupils and, based on the same 2012 GCSE results, concludes, ‘Academies do better in the 2 least disadvantaged bands but worse in the others’ (Stewart, 2013, cited in HofCESC; 2015a). Similarly, in a report for the Sutton Trust, entitled, ‘*Chain effects: the impact of academy chains on low income students*’ Hutchings et al. (2014) note:

*On average the improvement for disadvantaged pupils in 5A*CEM in sponsored academies in the analysis group was greater than the average for all mainstream schools between 2011 and 2013. However, there was enormous variation between chains with only 16 out of 31 exceeding the figure for all mainstream schools in 2013.
(Hutchings et al., 2014:4)*

Both the DfE (2013) and Sutton Trust (2014) reports, however, suffer from the methodological weakness of combining the data from pre-2010 and post-2010 sponsored academies, making separate extrapolation impossible and meaningful trends difficult to verify.

2.5.6 Impact of Converter Academies (2010 - to Present)

Machin (2012:2) states that, 'We do not yet have robust, academically rigorous evidence on the coalition academies...time needs to pass before it is possible to evaluate their impact in a meaningful way', whilst Mansell (2016:29) concludes, 'As a newer policy, there is clearly less evidence of the specific impact of Converter Academies than on their predecessors.' Despite the relative newness of the programme, it is, nevertheless, still surprising how little research has been conducted into the performance of Converter Academies. Andrews and Perera (2017) assessed the performance of 1,170 mainstream secondary schools that converted to academy status between 2010/11 and 2014/15. These schools were included in a 'treatment' group, whilst a further 50 schools that converted between 2015/16 and 2016/2017 were included in a 'control' group. In both the 'treatment' and 'control' groups, only 'legacy-enrolled' pupils who took their GCSEs or equivalents by the summer of 2015 were included in the data, to bypass any changes in pupil composition as a result of academization. They concluded:

*When we consider the impact of all Converter Academies together, in aggregate, we find that there is a slightly negative impact on pupil GCSE attainment following conversion. However, as with the post-2010 sponsored academies, this effect is first apparent a year before conversion takes place, indicating it does not reflect the impact of academization per se.
(Andrews and Perera, 2017)*

The House of Commons (2015:4) 'Academies and Free Schools' report observes that as Converter Academies are likely to have been previously high-attaining schools, the issue is whether they can raise attainment still further, whilst the Worth (2014) report, 'Analysis of academy school performance in GCSEs 2013: Final report' adds:

*Analysis of 2013 exam results seems to show more progress amongst Converter Academies than all non-academy schools.... A more robust longitudinal analysis shows no significant difference in attainment progress after two years between Converter Academies and similar non-academy schools.
(Worth, 2014:4)*

One of the limitations of Andrews and Perera's (2017) research is that it only considers attainment, not progress. By contrast, the Worth (2014) report uses three different measures: % achieving 5 A*-C; capped Key Stage 4-point score and value added, to compare the 2014 Key Stage 4 results of Converter Academies, and similar maintained schools, as judged by pupil profile and Ofsted rating. Worth (2014) concludes:

*Comparing the average differences between Converter Academies and similar maintained schools using regression analysis, which takes account of average underlying differences in the characteristics of the pupils such as their prior attainment and the proportion eligible for free school meals, confirms that the differences are small.
(Worth, 2014:21)*

2.5.7 Impact of Converter Academies on Disadvantaged Pupils (2010 - to Present)

The House of Commons Education Select Committee in its (HofCESC; 2015) report, 'Academies and Free Schools' found the attainment of disadvantaged pupils to be highest in Converter Academies but still well below the percentage of pupils from advantaged backgrounds. Converter Academies also had a much lower percentage of disadvantaged children than sponsored academies - 20% compared to 44% in 2013. Worth (2014) suggests:

*...there is evidence that the attainment gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and those that are not is narrower in Converter Academies than in similar maintained schools. Though a modest reduction in the FSM attainment gap of just half a GCSE grade per pupil (6 percent of the existing gap), this might show an increased focus on disadvantaged pupils being taken by Converter Academies.
(Worth, 2014:29)*

Machin and Silva (2013) looked at the performance effects of academy conversion across the distribution of pupil prior attainment and found:

Indeed, irrespectively of whether we rank pupils by the school or national ability distribution, the effects of academy conversion are insignificantly different from zero - and possibly negative for later conversions - in the bottom 10% and 20% of the ability distribution, suggesting no beneficial effects on tail students in academies.

(Machin and Silva, 2013:9)

It is interesting that, 10 years after the introduction of Converter Academies, there is so little data available on their performance. One explanation is the difficulty in extrapolating meaningful figures and finding valid comparisons. As Gorard (2014:14) puts it, ‘...the Programme now includes Academies that had been private or selective schools, and which had been among the least deprived in their areas. So, this is no longer a sensible way of assessing success for the Programme.’ Furthermore, the changing methods for measuring school performance since 2010: value added, contextual value added, average points score, Attainment 8 and Progress 8 compound the difficulty of finding a consistent means of comparison. As Mansell (2017) explains:

Given all of these structural issues, academy supporters have long argued that we should be pragmatic: decision-making structures do not matter so long as pupils are getting a good education under these reformed institutions. But evidence as to the positive impact of academies compared to other schools remains slight-going-on-non-existent.

(Mansell, 2017:1)

2.5.8 Primary Academies

The House of Commons Education Select Committee in its report '*Academies and Free Schools*' notes that:

*We have sought but not found convincing evidence of the impact of academy status on attainment in primary schools. We recommend that the DfE commission, as a matter of urgency, research into the relationship between academy status and outcomes at KS1 and KS2.
(HofCESC; 2015a:54)*

In its response, the DfE points out, 'To carry out such analysis requires a large enough number of primary academies to have been open long enough to have a reasonable time series of results which can be analysed' (HofCESC; 2015b:14). To date, nothing has been published.

McDool (2016) examined the impact of Converter Academies upon pupils' percentile rank within their cohort, according to their average points score. Her 'treatment' group comprised individuals who attended primary schools that converted to academies whilst they were in attendance, with those pupils who completed Key Stage 2 before their primary school converted to become an academy - the 'control' group.

McDool (2016) concludes:

*The results indicate a positive and significant impact of Converter Academies upon pupil progress; Converter Academies increase the percentile rank of pupils' average point scores by between 1.1 and 2.6 percentile points, ceteris paribus. A positive influence is consistently identified throughout the analysis, regardless of the year of conversion and cohort observed...
(McDool, 2016:20-21)*

A limitation of McDool's (2016) research is its relatively small scale - she only considers Converter Academies between 2012 and 2014. However, it is one of the few studies to identify notable improvements in the overall performance of pupils in primary converters, despite her conclusion that pupils in the most advantaged neighbourhoods benefit disproportionately

more than those in the most deprived. Whilst the Education Policy Institute (2017:4) finds, 'Predominantly sponsored trusts are more likely to have demonstrated significant improvements at the end of primary school than converter trusts', their methodology is questionable as it does not account for 'legacy enrolled' pupils. Overall, therefore, the evidence is mixed with Stewart (2013) concluding, 'There is no evidence base for conversion of primary schools to academies. It is an experiment and there is, so far, no data in the public domain to detail whether it is a success or not' (Stewart, 2013, cited in HofCESC; 2015a).

2.5.9 The Drivers of the Academies Programme

Whether academies work or not depends on what is meant by working in terms of how they measure up to their defined roles, which are constantly changing. One approach focuses on results and performance that relate to the official raison d'être of academies, in improving levels of student achievement and attainment in deprived areas. Another involves assessment of the ideological and political impact of academies in repositioning schools in the market, in setting new ground rules for the funding, accountability and governance of schooling. (Gleeson, 2011:204).

With so little definitive evidence as to the impact of the academies' programme on improving educational outcomes, the question remains as to why governments since 2000 have promoted it so vigorously. Many commentators (Wilby, 2009; Beckett, 2011; Gunter, 2011; Rayner, 2017; Robertson, 2017) regard academies as a political construct, rather than an educational one, thereby requiring a more critical policy perspective. With no driving educational proposition, nor philosophy of how children should learn, it is argued that academies are the logical educational consequence of the neo-liberal values that have underpinned Labour and Conservative policies (Exley and Ball, 2014; Hicks, 2017; Rayner et al., 2018). Hicks (2017:6) highlights the essential components of a neo-liberal education, 'Stress on competition by results'; 'the teacher largely to be an *instructor* and transmitter of knowledge'; 'adherence to a formal curriculum' before concluding, 'Many of these aspects of neoliberalism can be observed in UK

schools today.’ The academies’ programme, it is argued, is part of a long campaign to marginalise LAs and built around unquestioning faith in the private sector (Whitty, 2008; Gunter, 2011; Rowley and Dyson, 2011; Junemann and Ball, 2012; Gunter and McGinity, 2014; Mansell, 2016; Francis, 2017; Rayner et al., 2018). Support for this argument is provided by the research of Bubb et al. (2019) who looked at the comparative costs of the ‘middle tier’ oversight function for academies and maintained schools and found the former 44% higher. For Mansell (2016):

A government which was really committed to investigating objectively what might make for the best learning conditions for children would be proceeding much more cautiously, paying careful attention to research, and only moving forward once it was confident that major change would be for the better.
(Mansell, 2016:37)

Exley and Ball (2011:7) similarly conclude, ‘...policy tends to be based on gut instinct rather than a weight of evidence’ demonstrating, ‘...a lack of seriousness about evidence-based policy making’ with ‘...reference only to very limited and selective evidence.’ Whilst Wrigley (2009), and Stewart (2015), argue that schools were better when overseen by LAs, other commentators (Adonis, 2008; Moynihan, 2008; O’Shaughnessy, 2012; Pearson/RSA; 2013) argue the opposite, seeing academies as a force for good, ‘Academies are injecting the best of the DNA of private schools into the state funded sector’ (Adonis, 2008:x). Moynihan (2008:14) dismisses the concerns around private sector sponsors who, ‘...are sometimes criticised because they are not educationalists. This misses the point. The predecessor schools may have been run by educationalists, and yet they were unsuccessful.’ For Mansell (2016:38), the rush towards academy status is, ‘a great looming leap in the dark.’ By contrast, Adonis (2008) and Cohen (2008) see it as commonsensical and logical, with Gove (2012:2) claiming it is, ‘...not about ideology. It’s an evidence-based, practical solution built on by successive governments - both Labour and Conservative.’ As can be seen, there are equally entrenched views on both sides, with Gleeson (2011) perhaps summing it up best when he writes:

On the one hand, it is possible to view the academy initiative as a highly progressive attempt to improve educational attainment in some of the weakest schools in the country. On the other, the history of academies could be construed as one in which powerful sponsors, with their own agendas and design, were handed public assets (and allegedly offered and given honours) that allowed them to define intakes, own schools and decide results (Gleeson, 2011:10).

2.5.10 Summary

Fighting the government's academies policy is like boxing with a phantom. Every time you're about to land a punch, it changes shape. Attempts to evaluate the academies' success as a homogeneous category are a waste of money, and arguing over the figures is pointless. (Wilby, 2009:2)

Looking at the vast range of performance data on different academies, the difficulty of accurate comparisons and constantly changing performance measures, it is difficult to disagree with the conclusion that, 'The government should stop exaggerating the success of academies and be cautious about firm conclusions except where the evidence merits it' (HofCESC; 2015a:64). In the absence of decisive evidence as regards performance outcomes, it appears that the academies' programme is ideologically driven to increase the role of the private sector and marginalise local authorities (Gunter, 2011; Ball, 2013; Stewart, 2015; Rayner, 2017; Glatter, 2018). As Gorard (2014:14) puts it, 'There is no success specific to Academies that might not also have come from straightforward increased investment in 'failing' schools.' Given that the majority of academies are voluntary 'converter' schools, however, surprisingly little research has been commissioned as to why schools have chosen to become academies. Whilst the research of Hatcher (2014) shows a growing disenchantment amongst some Headteachers towards LAs, and a desire to take a greater regional and national lead on educational issues, for Bassett et al. (2012) increased funding is a bigger driver than the 'freedoms' frequently espoused as explaining the programme's popularity.

As long ago as 2005, the House of Commons Education Select Committee (HofCESC; 2005:3) noted, 'the government should ensure that the current programme of academies is thoroughly evaluated, both in the respect of the performance of individual academies and the impact on neighbouring schools, before embarking on a major expansion of an untested model.' (Recommendation 9-15). Ten years later, in 2015, they reiterated these reservations, 'Current evidence does not allow us to draw conclusions on whether academies in themselves are a positive force for change' (HofCESC; 2015a: para. 63). Despite these concerns, this 'untested model' is now the new 'norm' in English education.

2.6 Federations

*Schools that collaborate in ministers' favoured way can claim £25,000. Others that join forces receive nothing.... Do schools decide to take the dramatic and difficult-to-reverse step of leaving their local authority to become an academy, as ministers enthusiastically advocate? Would they be better off staying with the local authority? Or is there a third way?
(Mansell, 2014:1)*

Prior to the Academies Act (2010), Federations were promoted by the Labour government (1997-2009), as a model to raise standards and foster collaborative working. Federations were defined by the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) as:

*A group of schools with a formal (i.e. written) agreement to work together to raise standards, promote inclusion, find new ways of approaching teaching and learning and build capacity between schools in a coherent manner. This will be brought about in part through structural changes in leadership and management, in many instances through making use of the joint governance arrangements invoked in the 2002 Act.
(NCTL; 2014b)*

Lindsay et al. (2007:10) identify four possible types of Federation, each with a differing degree of autonomy.

- (1) Statutory: hard governance federation;*
- (2) Statutory: soft governance federation;*
- (3) Non-statutory, soft federation;*
- (4) Non-statutory informal, loose collaboration.*

The key difference between Federations and MATs lies in the range of possible configurations and the continued involvement of the local authority. Another difference is financial. Whereas in a MAT all schools consolidate and share funding, within a Federation, schools can maintain separate budgets. The first of Lindsay et al.'s (2007) four types of Federation comes closest to a MAT structure, as this involves a single governing body overseeing all schools, akin to a MAT BoD. However, whereas in a MAT, the BoD are

accountable to the Academy Members, in a Federation, they are accountable to the LA.

2.6.1 The Effectiveness of Federations

Similar to academies, one of the difficulties in analysing the impact and effectiveness of Federations is the wide range of possible configurations. As Chapman, Muijs and MacAllister (2011:5) conclude, 'The diversity of Federations and collaborations within the system and the extensive range of terms used to describe them led to some confusion in defining different types of Federation.' Focusing on hard Federations, their research utilised a mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis for every Federation formed from 2004 onwards. Whilst a positive effect on student attainment at GCSE was noted, the majority of improvement occurred in Federations where higher-performing schools were partnered with lower-performing ones (Chapman, Muijs and MacAllister, 2011:4). Similarly, FSM, SEN and IDACI (income deprivation affecting children index) scores were higher in schools within Federations, although there was a two-to-four-year time lag before Federation/collaborative schools started to outperform non-Federation/collaborative schools (Chapman, Muijs and MacAllister, 2011:8). Smith (2011:6), in a comparison of Federations in the UK and Netherlands found, 'In terms of transforming the two schools, the element of collaboration can be seen as a way to build leadership capacity and social capital.' However, this study was very small scale, compared to that of Chapman et al. (2011), making generalisability difficult.

Lindsay et al. (2007), in a detailed evaluation of the effectiveness of school Federations, conclude that:

Analysis of the national datasets, however, revealed no statistically significant difference between schools in the Federation Programme and non-programme schools with respect to pupil achievement at KS2 or KS3. At KS4 there was no difference in the percentage of pupils achieving 5A-C. However, project schools recorded a significantly higher percentage of pupils gaining 5A*-G. (Lindsay et al., 2007:7)*

Interestingly, however, 'Both Headteachers (93%) and Chairs of Governors (85%), judged the Federation to have been somewhat or very successful in raising achievement....' showing a marked difference between perception and reality. A limitation of the report by Lindsay et al. (2007), however, is the lack of source data for case study interpretations, meaning these have to be taken on trust, although, as the study covers groups of Federations that had specific Department for Education and Skills (DfES) funding, the findings are likely to be transferable. A report by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) entitled, 'A study of hard federations of small primary schools' concludes, 'In all four Federations standards have risen and pupil numbers have increased' (NCSL; 2011:12) and that, 'There are considerable and wide-ranging advantages to federating for both schools and school leaders in England, according to the study' (NCSL; 2011:2). Similarly, the Ofsted (2011:13) report, 'Leadership of more than one school', reported that actions taken by federated leadership teams, 'had a positive impact on outcomes.'

2.6.2 The Advantages of Federating

Research evidence identifies four main areas:

Raising Standards

Whiffing et al. (2005:9, cited in Percy, 2006) point out that, 'Federation was likely to have a strong impact on raising achievement, with over 90% of Heads and Governors expecting at least a 'quite strong' impact on achievement.' The Public Sector Executive (PSE) study (2016:2) agreed, stating that, 'our school-to-school support is developing as a means of improving standards, and our schools are reaping the benefits', whilst Chapman et al. (2011:4), '...found that secondary Federations with executive leadership outperform Federations with traditional leadership structures (one Headteacher leading one school).'

Survival

Howarth (2014) considered a group of small, rural primary schools and found federating was advantageous to schools facing falling rolls and vulnerable

budgets as resources could be shared, and savings made, whilst the NCSL (2005:2) report actually cited a central benefit as consolidating provision to avoid closure. Mansell (2014:4) also points out that independence can be reviewed and protected in a Federation model, 'a Federation can be 'unpicked' if unsuccessful. By contrast, it seems almost impossible to reverse the decision to become an academy.'

Economies of Scale

Several studies (NCSL; 2005; 2011; 2012; Chapman, Muijs and MacAllister, 2011) see Federations as providing opportunities for savings in planning and administration time, whilst freeing up the mobility of staff and resources. In particular, streamlined leadership teams with specific areas of expertise, operating over more than one school, were seen as key benefits. For Chapman et al. (2011:4), '...additional capacity provides opportunities for income generation and provision of additional services to schools within and beyond the Federation.... Federations can also streamline their structures to offer other services for less cost.' Whilst each of these studies references value-for-money, no cost comparisons are made with different service providers.

Continuing Professional Development

The sharing of good practice and professional networking across schools within Federations, and the harnessing of staff expertise in more than one institution, is frequently cited as a key advantage of federating (Percy, 2006; Lindsay et al., 2007). Similarly, the incentivisation of leadership, and the positive impact on recruitment and retention, have also been identified as potential benefits of a federated structure (Percy, 2006; Ofsted, 2011; Howarth, 2014). Central to these are the opportunities for joined up professional development, strategic planning across a group of schools, and the opportunities for curriculum reform that can be achieved through working within one much larger organisation (Ofsted, 2011; Howarth, 2014).

2.6.3 The Disadvantages of Federating

One of the problems with studies of Federations is their relatively small-scale making generalisations difficult. This is further compounded by the lack of extrapolation of the different types of Federations. Despite this, however, key themes emerge from the research:

Financial

Lindsay et al. (2007) state that:

Barriers to success included the lack of a clear legal status of the federation director; tensions arising from imbalance of power in the successful school-weaker school model; and uncertainty about sustainability arising from the cessation of financial support at the end of the programme.
(Lindsay et al., 2007:7)

The issue around finances and pooling of budgets is a consistent theme (NCSL; 2005; Hill, 2011) with concern over whether individual schools should keep their individual funding allowances or pool monies centrally. This tension never seems to get adequately resolved.

Possible loss of autonomy and identity

The loss of autonomy and identity for schools entering into Federations is a common concern expressed by staff, parents and governors (NCSL; 2005; Percy, 2006; Chapman et al., 2011; Smith, 2011). In particular, in these studies, unease was expressed over the potentially negative effects on individual schools of successful staff being utilised across the Federation. Whilst Chapman et al. (2011) found that school leaders were federating to foster collaboration, and embrace change, the NCSL (2005) study claims, 'Balancing the needs of one school against those of the Federation was a particular challenge; potential problems emerging when schools had different cultures and a shared vision was imposed.'

Sustainability

Glatter and Harvey (2006:40) raise the issue of sustainability of Federations, and, 'what are they for? Are they only to nurse ailing schools back to health or is the model broader, for example to conserve scarce leadership resource?' For Lindsay et al. (2007:6), 'A particular strength of the programme has been its 'tight/loose' nature.... The support of different types of Federation within the programme allowed schools to explore different purposes, foci and degrees of collaboration pertinent to their particular needs and priorities.' However, within this, Lindsay et al. (2007) acknowledge sustainability as a problem without the harder Federation structure that locks in governance and shared ways of operating from the outset. This is also an argument expressed in support of MATs, demonstrating that, whilst flexibility is often portrayed as a key advantage of federated structures, it can also be a weakness.

2.6.4 Summary

Prior to the establishment of MATs, Federations were promoted as a means for schools to collaborate, share resources, achieve economies of scale and raise standards. Although undoubtedly limited in its scope and coverage, the available research shows Federations as a potentially powerful lever to improve educational outcomes and provide a forum for schools to work together. However, since 2010, Federations have been largely ignored by government with there being no financial incentives for schools to join together in this way. The most likely explanation for this is the central role of the local authority within a Federation, and its non-existent role in a MAT. For, as Emma Knights, CEO of the National Governors' Association (NGA), and quoted in Mansell (2014:6) points out, 'If the government really cared about improving practice in schools, they would be pushing LA-maintained Federations just as hard as they push MATs. But that's not what's happening.'

2.7 Multi-Academy Trusts

The creation and growth of MATs has seen further benefits in terms of more formal collaboration between schools, both to improve standards and increase financial efficiencies and sustainability. There are, of course, many different and vital forms of partnerships that support school improvement, including teaching school alliances. These can complement and enhance the benefits of MATs, but they are not a substitute for them.... Where feeder primaries and secondaries form a MAT and work even more closely together, the shared accountability and reduction in bureaucratic barriers, along with a shared ethos and understanding of each other's expertise and culture, aids transition and ensures a consistent educational experience. (DfE; 2016b:8)

In this section, research specific to MATs is considered including those case studies of MATs that have been published. It is presented under the most common research areas that emerge from the literature: Purpose, Governance/Leadership, Finance, Performance and School Improvement.

2.7.1 MAT Purpose

For Simon et al. (2019:5), 'The motivation of principal actors in schools and MATs is central to a school becoming an academy, to an academy forming or joining a MAT, and to an academy or MAT sponsoring an underperforming school.' Whilst focused mainly on sponsored academies, their research nonetheless identifies some key issues:

Depending upon the context for change, motivations could be pragmatic (relating to the market positioning of the school in relation to its competitors and enhancing access to scarce resources in a shifting structural landscape); altruistic (an espoused motivation by many CEOs driven by altruism and the desire to share values, experience and good practice); and/or underpinned by moral purpose. (Simon et al., 2019:9)

Simon et al. (2019) are keen to emphasise that these different purposes are not mutually exclusive and can shift over time. Nevertheless, they provide a

useful insight into understanding the formation of MATs and the drivers of the decision-makers.

2.7.2 MAT Autonomy

Joining a MAT means a significant shift in autonomy and accountability away from Local Governing Bodies (LGBs) to a central Board of Directors (BoD) who hold the decision-making responsibility (NCTL, 2014a). Trustees are responsible for the same three core aims of governance as a governing body in a maintained school: setting the direction; holding the Headteacher/CEO to account; and ensuring financial probity. The extent of the power of LGBs is dependent on the level of delegation from the MAT board who can change the powers delegated, or even abolish the LGBs altogether should they so wish.

The NGA (2016) has been particularly critical of the government's efforts to make the distinction between the BoD and LGBs clear:

*NGA is concerned that the Department for Education (DfE) advice for performance, accountability and governance in MATs is lacking. Where DfE advice and practice does exist, it lacks clarity and often consistency across the department.... NGA would like the DfE to provide more in terms of generic advice including guidance on structures and accountability that MATs could then choose from.
(NGA; 2016: paras.51-52)*

The House of Commons Education Select Committee report on 'Multi-Academy Trusts' observes, 'The NGA warned that there can be a power struggle between trust boards and local governing boards where changes have not been well communicated' (HofCESC; 2017:14). Particular reference was made to the Scheme of Delegation which outlines where accountabilities lie within a MAT structure (NGA; 2016: para.59).

In December 2016, the DfE updated their '*MAT - Good practice guidance and expectations for growth*' handbook to advise:

The board and its executive Leaders are transparent with any school looking to join the MAT about the level of delegated power that will be vested at a local level and the circumstances in which this may vary over time.
(DfE; 2016b:20)

However, despite this, the House of Commons Education Select Committee concludes:

...there is still significant confusion about the move to boards of trustees being the accountable bodies for MATs. This move has not been communicated well enough by the Department and has led schools to join or start trusts without full knowledge of how their governance structures will change.
(HofCESC; 2017:14)

Another key issue is whether an incoming school has a seat on the BoD and can influence decision-making (NCTL; 2014b). This issue was evident as early as 2008 with a PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2008) report claiming that Governors and Heads can feel disempowered if the balance between the chain and the individual school is not right. The same conclusion was reached in a NCSL (2011) study who labelled this scenario, 'the old LA model in a new guise' (NCSL; 2011:48). To partly counter these criticisms, the DfE did stipulate, in 2016, that all MATs must publish their schemes of delegation. However, it did not reference the fact that this document can be changed at any time by a majority vote of the BoD. Finch et al. (2016:27) conclude that the relationship between chain and local management is often not clear and that chains can have difficulties with LGBs, 'that have misunderstood that decision-making power lies with the trust.'

Salokangas and Chapman (2014) explore governance in two chains of academy schools. Whilst this study is relatively small scale, and focuses only on sponsored academies, it nevertheless draws some interesting conclusions including that, '...sponsors utilised a variety of governance and management

strategies within their academies that could be associated with control' and that:

*...schools considering both conversion to academy status and joining an existing chain of academies face a complex task of identifying the most suitable arrangements for their needs. Detailed information... is not necessarily transparent or available to the general public, making navigation in this market particularly problematic.
(Salokangas and Chapman, 2014:382-383)*

There is also some evidence to suggest that the emergence of a new middle tier of academy sponsors is replicating the weaker features formerly exhibited by some LAs (Salokangas and Chapman, 2014; Ofsted, 2019), with the freedom and autonomy often associated with academy status varying significantly both within, and between, academy chains (Menzies et al., 2018; Ofsted, 2019).

Hill et al. (2012:47) consider the different types and levels of governance within MATs, with particular reference to the ARK and AET academy sponsors. Their research highlights the importance of informal networks for new academies and principals considering joining a chain or Federation recommending, '... not to look at the formal documents but to ask other principals 'how does it work?' The data for Hill et al.'s (2012:48) report was sourced during 2010-2011 when the academies' programme was still in its infancy. However, their observation that, 'A key learning point seems to be that schools and sponsors need to understand from the start the nature of the relationship that is being proposed between each other' is an important one. Similarly, Hill et al. (2012) note that:

*...converter chains seemed to be tweaking rather than radically rethinking the governance model they had inherited from their previous incarnation. As a result, these chains may find that although their current models meet their immediate needs and circumstances, they may over time have to revisit their governance structures.
(Hill et al., 2012:50)*

Clearly articulated decision-making and communication at each level of governance, especially around the respective roles of the BoD and LGB, is seen as crucial to effective decision-making (Grotberg and Robb, 2015; Wilshaw, 2016; Ofsted, 2019; Beaumont et al., 2019; Fellows et al., 2019). Without this, there is a risk of schools joining MATs only to find they have less autonomy and 'freedom' than when operating as standalone maintained schools.

An embryonic body of research is beginning to emerge on the changing roles of Headteachers within a MAT structure. Described by Lewis and Murphy (2008:135) as, '...more like branch managers than CEOs', Fellows et al. (2019:7) talks of, '...an enormous change in the status of Headteachers which has perhaps been under-discussed in the national debate.' Ofsted (2019:23) also considers the range of expectations and accountabilities expected of Senior Leaders within schools compared to the, '...often limited accountability of the MAT itself.' This is an under-researched area, worthy of further exploration.

2.7.3 MAT Finances

When schools join a MAT, all assets are transferred to the MAT, including any budget surpluses. Funding is also organised differently, with the allocation for each school being paid directly to the MAT which then distributes monies according to its scheme of delegation. For schools that previously operated as individual academies, this could mean a substantial loss of income as the MAT would normally 'top slice' around 5% of recurrent income to provide centralised 'services' and to support the salaries of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Chief Financial Officer (CFO). For converting maintained schools, some of these costs are recouped by the monies previously paid to the LA to manage the school, (the LACSEC grant), being repaid directly to the school. However, following a national decision in 2016 to place this grant within the dedicated schools' budget, this additional funding would most likely be insufficient to cover any new costs. The DfE (2016b:45) publication, '*Multi-Academy trusts: Good practice guidance and expectations for growth*' claims,

'MATs are better able to plan and put in place efficient workforce structures, as well as drive savings in back-office costs and procurement - ensuring every pound works as hard as possible in improving outcomes for pupils.' This claim may be somewhat optimistic as, on the same page it states, 'The transition from a stand-alone academy to a MAT will not automatically bring economies of scale, or efficiencies, because there may also be additional central costs' (DfE; 2016b:45). Townsley and Andrews (2017) claim:

At secondary level ... LA schools spend £1,539 per pupil, while MAT schools spend £1,490

[that is a saving of £49 per pupil].

At primary level, LA schools spend £1,261 per pupil, while MAT schools spend £1,255

[savings can also be seen here, reduced to £6 per pupil], but

*At primary level, LA schools spend £2,179 per pupil on teaching staff [as part of a MAT], £23 less than the £2,202 spend by MAT schools.
(Townsley and Andrews, 2017:3-4)*

[So, per pupil expenditure on teaching staff in primary schools as part of a MAT is still £23 per pupil higher than in LA schools.]

By contrast, other studies, (Finch et al., 2016; Bubb et al., 2019; Grubb, 2019; Hickie, 2019; Ofsted, 2019), found few chains were large enough to enjoy economies of scale and there was no apparent correlation between the size of the top-slice from schools' budgets and the range and quality of services provided.

For Grotberg and Robb (2015:37), the development of a, 'Common school operating model, in addition to the economies of scale that come from shared services and central functions, can drive up standards', a view echoed by Crowhurst and Bellio (2015). Beaumont et al. (2019) consider the issue of General Annual Grant (GAG) pooling whereby the Trust receives monies for all its schools, and then allocates each a share, concluding:

*When we talk to single unit academies about why they do not want to join a MAT, one of the most common responses is that don't see the value in paying money to a MAT that they could spend on their own school - the amount they have to pay to cover central services is seen as a major stumbling block.
(Beaumont et al., 2019:12-13)*

2.7.4 MAT Performance

Chapman et al. (2009), and Chapman et al. (2011), identify 122 Federations and use 'Propensity Score Matching' to compare schools. Both studies find a small, but overall positive effect 'impact' in terms of pupil outcomes, although this was mainly when a stronger school teamed with a weaker one. There have been a number of educational studies which have compared the performance of schools in MATs with the performance of all schools, and with Local Authorities (Andrews, 2017, 2018; Andrews and Perera, 2017; DfE; 2015, 2016a, 2018a; Hutchings and Francis, 2017; Worth, 2015, 2016; Eyles and Machin, 2015), but, as Greany (2018:34) points out, 'Overall, these studies highlight the range of methodological challenges involved in classifying MATs and assessing their performance, given the pace of change in both policy and practice in this area over the past decade.' For Hutchings et al. (2014), and Hutchings and Francis (2017), there was significant variability within and between academy chains, although a small number generated impressive outcomes, especially for disadvantaged pupils, whilst the Education Policy Institute (EPI) study claims there was evidence of some impact at KS2 but none at KS4 (Hutchings et al., 2014; Hutchings and Francis, 2017). The DfE (2015) originally published comparisons between academy chains and LAs with Andrews (2018) adopting a similar methodology. Few differences between MATs and LAs were seen. The DfE (2018) then used new pupil progress measures at KS2 and KS4 for schools that had been in established MATs for at least three years - the general conclusion being that primary MATs perform in line with national averages, whilst secondary MATs perform below. However, this research does not distinguish between sponsored and converter MATs, with low achievement data from the former possibly skewing the findings. Bernardinelli et al. (2018) used 'Propensity

Score Matching’ to compare a group of standalone academies and maintained schools, all with similar performance, demographics and characteristics, over a three-year period. Overall, this study found no statistically significant impact from MAT status for pupils in either primary or secondary academies, reflecting the observation of Ofsted (2019:22) that, ‘There is little evidence that schools in MATs outperform maintained schools or vice versa.’

2.7.5 MAT School Improvement

Greany (2018:38) claims, ‘Empirical research on how Federations and MATs secure improvement is limited.’ Several studies (Hutchings et al., 2014; HofCESC; 2015; Ofsted, 2019) have recommended that best practice should be examined across academy chains with successful lessons disseminated. The importance of school improvement strategies being embedded within a MATs overall vision, values and pedagogy (Hill et al., 2012; Carter, 2015), whilst recognising the delicate balance between central and local control (Salokangas and Chapman, 2014; Salokangas and Ainscow, 2018), and that schools are at different stages on their improvement journeys (Carter, 2015), is also seen as crucial. Whilst the importance of school-to-school collaboration, and the sharing of expertise and knowledge within MATs, is regarded as a fundamental component of school improvement (Hill et al., 2012; Wilshaw, 2016; HofCESC; 2017); *how* this is achieved is barely referenced within the literature.

Greany (2018:10) looks at sustainable school improvement across 31 MATs, whilst also incorporating applicable findings from Federations and Teaching School Alliances. His research identifies five ‘fundamental’ areas for sustainability: establishing school improvement capacity; forensic analysis of school improvement needs; supporting and deploying leadership; access to effective practice and expertise at classroom and department level; and monitoring and reviewing improvements in outcomes (Greany, 2018:12-13). If these ‘fundamentals’ are then combined with vision, values, culture and strategy, and a commitment to a sustainable learning organisation,

improvement at scale can then emerge. For Greany (2018), and Ofsted (2019), the majority of MATs adopt a partnership approach to implementing their school improvement strategy, with high levels of trust and alignment. Despite this, however, 'The question of where and how to standardise or align practice across a MAT or Federation and where to give schools and teachers the autonomy to make their own decisions is significant but often contentious' (Greany, 2018:16). Whilst standardisation reduces autonomy, and limits flexibility, it also allows for greater consistency in policy and practice; Ofsted (2019:18) referencing, '...the difficult sweet spot between autonomy and some measure of centralisation.'

Muijs (2015) considers the impact of partnering high and low-performing primary schools, categorising activity into three areas: leadership development, development of teaching and learning approaches and generating quick wins, with Robinson (2012) emphasising the need to apply school improvement lessons across different contexts. For Lord et al. (2016), in his study of executive headship, there were four areas crucial to developing school improvement: consistency and collaboration, developing staff, strategic thinking, and utilising external expertise. Gleason (2016:i) looks at Charter Management Organisations (CMOs) in the USA and found the highest impact practices to be comprehensive behaviour policies, longer school days and a rigorous focus on boosting school achievement. This study, however, was almost entirely focused on schools in areas of high deprivation. For Hofman et al. (2015), in a study of Dutch Federations, teacher and school effectiveness, coupled with the quality of school governance, had the biggest impact on achievement.

According to Hill (2016:2), 'The best chains have thought about, evolved and systemised their approach to school improvement.' Ten characteristics of effective school improvement strategies are identified, including: academies working together, coaching improvements in teaching and learning and using enquiry-based learning. For Greany (2018:19):

Moving knowledge and expertise around was a priority for our MATs and federations and most saw this as a strength. However, knowledge sharing was sometimes difficult to sustain and some acknowledged that schools are not good at evaluating practice and drawing out what has made something successful.
(Greany, 2018:19)

Whilst MAT Headteachers were generally positive about the challenge and support they received from their Trust (Greany, 2018; Ofsted, 2019) to sustain school improvement, 'MATs and Federations must learn to operate as both hierarchies and networks, drawing on a mix of central and school-based capacity and with aligned practices in appropriate areas' (Greany, 2018:26). Too often, school improvement strategies were seen as fixing what was not working, rather than developing what was already successful. Fostering collaboration, improving leadership, securing accountability including peer reviews, identifying, evaluating and sharing best practice and professional development and feedback were all seen as having the greatest impact (Greany, 2018:68).

2.7.6 Summary

There is a small but growing body of literature on MATs, outside of the narrow focus on performance measures and outcomes. Common issues emerge including autonomy, accountability, control, the division of finances, school improvement and the changing roles of Governors and Headteachers within a MAT structure. Much of this research has methodological limitations, however, most notably in the aggregation of different types of academies: sponsored, converter, free school into one research base. As these institutions are established and governed very differently, it can be difficult to extrapolate meaningful observations that inform generalisability.

The literature review reveals the tensions throughout the academies' programme: tensions around purpose, tensions around autonomy, tensions around performance and tensions around accountability. It reveals its inherent paradoxes and the polarisation of views that exist: public versus private, independence versus centralisation and fragmentation versus

coherence. As with any ideological construct there is very little middle ground. It shows that, regardless of whether the academies' programme is seen as 'revolutionary' or 'evolutionary', the structure and governance of education within England has changed significantly over the last ten years. Within the literature, we also see the difficulty in forming conclusions. Confusion around the different types of academies, the contradictory nature of many research findings, and the difficulty of comparing like-for-like, within the ever-changing world of national performance measures, makes meaningful comparisons challenging. The basic question of whether or not academies have improved the educational experience of young people still goes unanswered.

The Conceptual Framework encapsulates the key themes and observations that will guide this study. We still know very little about why school leaders decide to follow the academy and multi-academy path, whether or not the espoused benefits are realised, and whether decisions are later regretted or endorsed. By surveying and interviewing Governors and Senior Leaders at three different stages of the conversion process, it is hoped to move beyond the statistics to a better understanding of how and why decisions are made. This should then shed a light on the conversion process itself and those factors that support, and hinder, the successful transition into a MAT.

2.8 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework has been developed from the theoretical review of the literature and the key themes and lines of enquiry that have emerged. It is represented diagrammatically below and within the five areas outlined. Within this, autonomy emerges as the central concept, and the pivot through which the related issues of accountability, control, ideology and partnership can be explored, interpreted and understood.

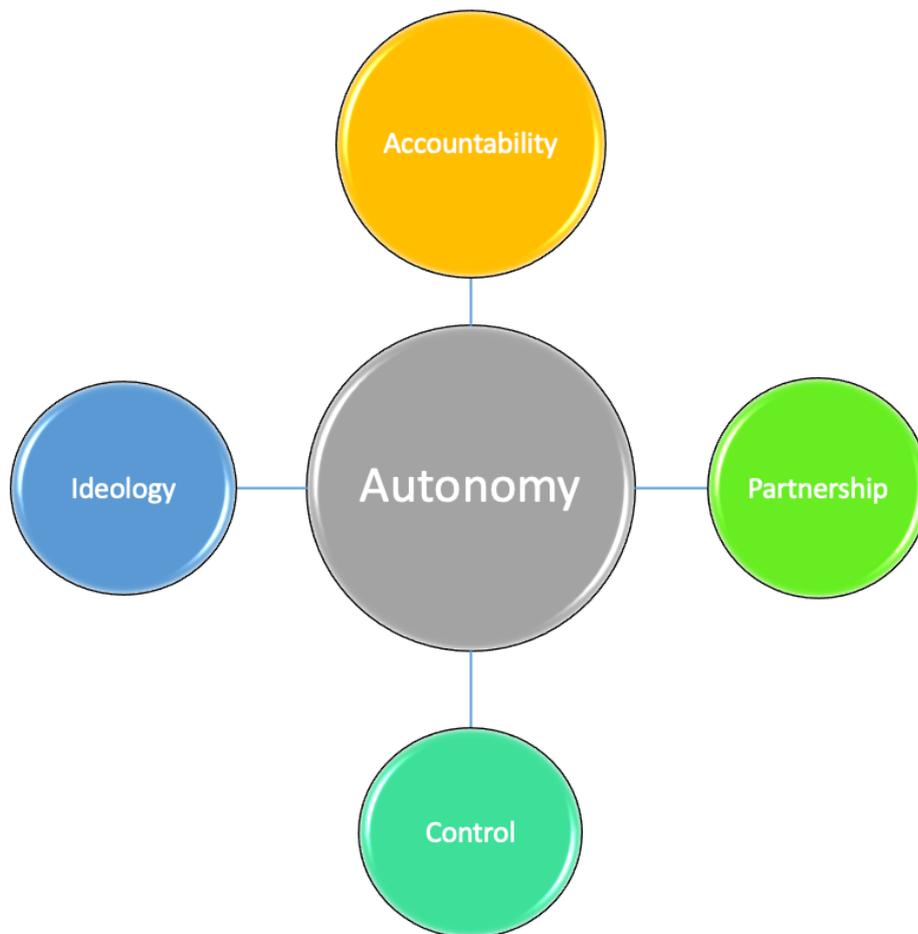


Figure 1 Conceptual framework of key themes

2.8.1 Autonomy

Autonomy is the defining characteristic of the academies' programme with its emphasis on independence, freedom and schools being in charge of their own affairs (Goodman and Burton, 2012; Ladd and Fiske, 2016; Mansell, 2016; Rayner et al., 2018). Closely allied to innovation, it assumes that front-line

professionals are best placed to make decisions, that bureaucracies stifle innovation and that local government discourages risk taking (Mansell, 2016; Glatter, 2018). By freeing schools from these constraints, it is argued, potential can be unlocked, new approaches developed and radical transformation occur. Such a viewpoint, however, assumes a common definition of autonomy. In reality, autonomy is difficult to define, explain and measure (Woessmann, 2007; Cheng et al., 2016). For many observers, opting out of local authority control, having local management of schools and accessing devolved funding are about enhancing autonomy (Moynihan, 2008; Sandals and Bryant, 2014; Cirin, 2014). However, with academies directly contracted to central government through their funding agreements, and termination of these requiring a 4-week notice period from the DfE, and a 7-year notice period from schools, control can be re-exerted over autonomous institutions relatively easily. Autonomy, by its very definition, is bequeathed from somewhere else and can therefore be retracted. The key questions, therefore, are to what extent academy status translates into meaningful autonomy on the ground (Pearson/RSA, 2013; Cirin, 2014; Mansell, 2016; Salokangas and Ainscow, 2018), and whether supposed 'freedoms' are utilised, actually work and, if so, how (Bassett et al., 2012; Mansell, 2016). Coupled with this is the issue of whether enhanced autonomy has actually improved the educational experiences of young people within schools.

Operational and professional autonomy are also very different (Caldwell, 2008; Keddie, 2015). Whilst operationally, schools may be free to make their own decisions in areas such as staffing and resourcing, professional autonomy is severely restricted. National accountability measures, league tables, preferred curriculum structures, and oversight by Ofsted offer little opportunity or motivation to do things differently (Dunford, 2012; Pearson/RSA, 2013; Keddie, 2015; Salokangas and Ainscow, 2018). With the state determining how schools are measured, and what constitutes success, autonomy can only be realized by trying to meet these goals, the very pursuit of which prevents schools from acting autonomously. Autonomy, therefore, to some is largely illusory. Autonomy is also dependent upon the nature and

level of autonomy in wider society with schools in different cultures being given varying levels of discretion (Cheng and Mok, 2007; Cheng et al., 2016; Greany and Waterhouse, 2016). This can make international comparisons difficult. Coupled with this is the willingness, or otherwise, of decision-makers to make use of their autonomy and the reasons why. Autonomy is often described in terms of a list of prescribed tasks over which individuals have ownership. In reality it is more complex, dependent upon the interplay of leadership, context, culture and values within institutions, internal and external autonomy often differing radically (Woessmann, 2007; Hanushek et al., 2011; Cheng et al., 2016). In a MAT structure, the deciphering of decision-making can also be problematic. Autonomy may sit at the level of the overarching trust, rather than within individual schools, meaning Headteachers are more implementers than designers. This can then lead to the paradox whereby schools within MATs have less autonomy than schools within a local authority led system (Mansell, 2016; Boyask, 2018; Glatter, 2018; Simon et al., 2019).

2.8.2 Accountability

Accountability and autonomy are both complementary and contradictory. Whilst it is frequently claimed autonomy without accountability creates inconsistency, and the inability to compare performance and effectiveness, too much accountability can stifle innovation and creativity (Whitty, 2008; Dunford, 2012; Keddie, 2015; Caldwell, 2016). In many ways, academies and MATs can appear to be accountable to no-one and everyone. With no local authority involvement, no local democracy to provide support and oversight, and no requirement to engage with their communities, localised scrutiny of decision-making is minimal. Social responsibilities, including county-wide commitments to provide for the most disadvantaged, can be side-stepped through selective admissions' policies and by 'off-rolling' pupils (Tough and Brooks, 2007; Titcombe, 2008; Machin and Vernoit, 2011). Whereas a local authority-led system has a built-in advantage when it comes to coherence and coordination, the move towards stakeholder governance has meant

increasingly hierarchical systems and structures with local networks and engagements frequently ignored (Pritchard and Crossley-Holland, 2012; Smith and Abbott, 2014). This has been compounded by the flux and fluidity within the middle tier of education, with responsibilities and processes now shared by a heterogeneous mix of old and new policy organisations, each vying for control and influence (Muir, 2012; Ball, 2013; Bubb et al., 2019). Contradictory, repetitive and frequently changing agendas, coupled with uncertainty about where different responsibilities lie, and who is accountable for what, have left academies having to navigate an increasingly opaque educational landscape. Whilst the introduction of RSCs in 2014 might have been seen as trying to level the playing field between academies and maintained schools, in reality their remit is focused around increasing the numbers of academies and MATs, rather than supporting school improvement (Mansell, 2016; Dickens, 2017; Greany and Higham, 2018). Difficulties have also been compounded by the piecemeal nature of legislation applicable to academies, combining elements of the independent schools standards, DfE statutes, differentiated funding agreements and maintained schools' guidance.

Internal accountabilities differ within a MAT with the BoD controlling all aspects of the Trust's work and LGBs delegated their duties and responsibilities. Operating as little more than sub-committees of the BoD, LGBs can struggle to understand their new roles and expectations, with schemes of delegation able to be changed at will by a majority vote (NGA, 2016; HofCESC, 2017; Breslin, 2018; Fellows et al., 2019). Within MATs, the establishment of Executive teams has centralised services and provision, whilst sharpening the accountabilities of schools and senior leaders. This combination of centralization and decentralization agendas has led to tension. Coupled with this is the question of the accountability of the MAT itself (Wilshaw, 2016; Ofsted, 2019). Whereas schools and local authorities are subject to regular inspections, the MAT has no formal review mechanism, with responsibilities of Trust leaders being frequently less transparent than for those working in schools. Whilst academies and MATs face the same

national accountability framework as all schools, enhanced funding for the former leads some commentators to claim a two-tier system is in operation (Titcombe, 2008; Stevens, 2011; Gorard, 2014).

2.8.3 Ideology

Ideologies are comprehensive patterns of cognitive and moral beliefs with consequential actions that often become political. As a concept, ideology sits at the heart of the academies' programme structure of loosely connected autonomous schools. A common criticism of academies' policy is that it is more about sidelining local authorities, breaking up national pay and conditions, and encouraging private sector involvement, than looking after the needs of the most vulnerable (West and Pennell, 2002; Gunter, 2011; Ball, 2013; Wilkins, 2017). This is because, whereas the early academies were located solely in areas of deprivation, and had a strong social justice focus, (Goodman and Burton, 2012; Eyles and Machin, 2014), the introduction of Converter Academies in 2010 re-positioned schools within a marketplace where private interests were dominant and education could be profit making (Whitty, 2008; Ball, 2013; West and Bailey, 2013; Gunter and McGinity, 2014; Rayner et al., 2018). Rather than being the 'revolutionary' new programme frequently claimed, critics argue that the Grant Maintained programme of the 1980s has simply been rebooted and rebranded with many of the proposed 'freedoms' and advantages already available to maintained schools (Baker, 2010; Stevenson, 2011). As a result, financial inducements, rather than any driving educational philosophy or proposition, are the main reasons for schools converting Bassett et al., 2012; Mansell, 2016).

Within the academies' programme, there is also the difficulty of drawing conclusions. Despite the vast array of performance data available, the very basic question of whether academies have actually improved educational standards goes unanswered (Briggs and Simons, 2014; Hutchings et al., 2014; Sims et al., 2015; Mansell, 2016). Extrapolating outcomes and trends from the early sponsored academies to Converter Academies and free schools, and within the ever-changing world of national performance measures, is difficult

- the fluidity and evolving shape of the academies' programme hindering comparisons. The system itself seems designed to make the collection of robust evidence difficult. Despite this, most research suggests the impact of academization on performance outcomes is negligible (Machin and Silva, 2013; Stewart, 2015; Andrews and Perera, 2017). This adds further support to the view of academies as a political construct rather than an educational one. Coupled with this is the ignoring by successive Conservative governments of other forms of school organisation, such as Federations, because of the continued involvement of local authorities. Ideologies, by their very nature, are never completely consistent with the facts of the experiences they claim to interpret, and proponents of the academies' system tend to attribute any improvement, however small, to supporting their case whilst detractors do the opposite. This polarisation of views sums up the entrenched positions on either side of the academies' divide: as either a neo-liberal concept or a pragmatic response to decades of sustained educational failure. There is little middle ground. Motivations for forming MATs can, therefore, be explained by altruistic, moralistic and pragmatic reasoning, with much dependent upon the beliefs and values of the CEO and other related key stakeholders, and the life experiences that have shaped them (Simon et al., 2019).

2.8.4 Control

Since the 1988 ERA, the balance of power and control has gradually shifted away from local authorities towards schools and central government (Glatter, 2018; Rayner et al., 2018). This shift away from local authorities was meant to give greater autonomy to schools and to enable them to control and prioritise their own resource needs. However, with funding agreements for academies and MATs based on a hierarchical, contractual relationship with central government, rather than the informal, shared priorities that used to characterise schools' involvement with local authorities, control has mainly been devolved upwards (Ball, 2013; Sandals and Bryant, 2014; Ladd and Fiske, 2016; Wilkins, 2017, Rayner et al., 2018). Whilst the early sponsored

academies brought private interests into the state sector, they were relatively few in number. The Converter Academies programme, by contrast, opened the door to private interests in the form of sponsors and trusts running schools on a much larger scale. In this respect, the educational landscape of England has changed significantly: from a publicly provided and publicly delivered school system to one that is publicly provided but, increasingly, privately delivered (Whitty, 2008; Glatter, 2011; Royley and Dyson, 2011; Gunter and McGinity, 2014; Ball, 2015; Goodman and Burton, 2012).

Influence and control have been diversified across the middle tier of education with a wide range of state and non-state policy actors now directly engaging with academies and MATs (Muir, 2012; Rogers, 2012; Bubb et al., 2019). Although, increased parental choice is frequently touted as a positive outcome of the academies' programme, in reality, parents have a reduced role. Parent governors are not compulsory on MAT Boards and parents have little say as to whether a school becomes an academy. The academies' programme itself remains one that is centrally directed and locally administered (Pring, 2013; Rayner et al., 2018; West and Wolfe, 2018).

Control and power reside at various levels within MATs. Whilst LGBs can be tasked to deliver the majority of responsibilities at school level, these are delegated authorities. The BoD remains the legal entity for all its schools with funding paid directly to it and then distributed (Mansell, 2016; Beaumont et al., 2019; Fellows et al., 2019). Control over the 'top slice', and service provision to schools, resides with the BoD, who can utilise a hierarchical model of monitoring and oversight. Ironically, within such a structure, this can then lead to less control at individual school level. Whilst the MAT model allows trustees extensive discretion as to how governance is organised, conflicts of interests can result whereby control is exercised by a relatively small group of people holding dual roles and accountabilities. Within the MAT structure, there are few of the checks and balances that characterise a local authority led system (Muir, 2012; Thraves et al., 2012; Hatcher, 2014; HofCESC, 2015a).

2.8.5 Partnerships

Partnerships by their very nature can constrain autonomy. Within a self-improving school system of autonomous schools, the development of academies and MATs has led to new partnerships, both external and internal. Whilst the changing relationship of schools with local authorities and central government has already been referenced, MATs also have to develop relationships with the new agencies of the middle tier. The remit and responsibilities of these organisations is not always clear, leading to a confusing picture of who does what and why (Dunford, 2012; Bubb et al., 2019). Information sharing becomes problematic with agencies, such as a local authority, having to request information from schools rather than being entitled to receive it. Whilst local authorities hold a responsibility to plan school places across a locality, promote community cohesion, and ensure access and support, this is more difficult in the fragmented world of academization. With MATs operating as their own admissions' authorities, and with no recourse for parents to the local government ombudsman, there is evidence of covert selection of pupils, and of academies' profiles being less representative of their locality than similarly positioned maintained schools (Tough and Brooks, 2007; Machin and Vernoit, 2011). In a system of competing influences, marketisation and choice, there is growing evidence that some MATs are becoming increasingly self-serving, focusing solely on their own interests rather than those of their communities (Royley and Dyson, 2011; Stevens, 2011; Rayner, 2017).

Schools joining MATs are also thrown into new relationships with other schools, Directors, Trustees and the CEO. In most cases, these relationships are irreversible and, for sponsored academies, may not even have been chosen. Relationships have to be reset, with new lines of accountability shared and understood. This can then lead to internal conflict, especially between the BoD and LGBs. In terms of the benefits of a MAT structure, increased sharing of resources, professional development opportunities, networking and support have all been cited (Lindsay et al., 2007; Howarth,

2014; Greany, 2018). Ironically, however, many of these could have been achieved through alternative school structures and without any changes to existing governance. Whilst evidence shows that individual schools within MATs are generally good at knowing how to improve, and the strategies for getting there, achieving school improvement across a MAT is more complicated, with school improvement models frequently seen as too generic and insufficiently differentiated (Hill, 2016; HofCESC, 2017; Greany, 2018; Greany and Higham, 2018; Ofsted, 2019).

2.8.6 Conclusion

The conceptual framework has identified and drawn together the five key areas that have emerged from the broader, theoretical review of the literature. These are the lenses through which I will focus and examine the research questions. The methodological decisions made, and the choice and justification for the research instruments used, are discussed in detail within the Methodology chapter. Following this, in Chapter Four, the findings of the questionnaires and interviews are presented and discussed, alongside an analysis of their significance and importance. The emergent Discussion chapter then links these observations back to the themes of the Conceptual Framework, exploring the interplay between autonomy and accountability, and examining where the findings confirm, challenge or extend existing thinking.

CHAPTER THREE: MAPPING THE STUDY - METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the justification for this research project being located within the interpretivist tradition is explored, alongside the rationale for a qualitative case study, drawing upon the work of Stake (1995), Merriam (1988) and Yin (1989). My positionality as researcher/participant is discussed, with issues of insider-knowledge, impartiality, bias and power explored. The different sampling strategies adopted, and the research instruments chosen, are considered with reference to the research questions, and pilot study, whilst detailed consideration is given to the six core ethical principles outlined in the ESRC (2015), '*Framework for Research Ethics*' and the BERA (2018) '*Ethical Guidelines*'. Following this, a description of how data was collected, organised, structured and validated is examined, alongside the four-stage coding and analysis process adopted for this study.

3.2 Rationale for an Interpretivist Paradigm

Paradigms have been described by Punch (1998:28) as, 'a set of assumptions about the social world, and about what constitutes proper techniques and topics for inquiry. In short, it means a view of how science should be done.' Research paradigms can be divided into three main types: positivism, interpretivism and critical postmodernism. In this section, I briefly consider the nature of such paradigms within the quantitative/qualitative and natural/social science debates and the relevance, or otherwise, of these categorisations to my research and chosen methodology.

Positivism assumes that knowledge is quantifiable and objective with reality independent of human perception. Described by Henning et al. (2004: 17) as, '...concerned with uncovering truth and presenting it by empirical means', the positivist researcher utilizes objective, scientific methods to ensure research is valid, reliable and capable of replication. Qualitative researchers, by contrast, suggest that the methods used in quantitative research are not the

only ways of establishing validity. They argue that experiments and statistics can be inappropriate for examining social science, where the behaviours, motivations and actions of individuals can provide, what Silverman (2000: 8) called, '...a deeper understanding of social phenomena.' It is this 'deeper understanding' and interpretation of the social, professional and personal worlds of Governors and Senior Leaders involved in a major transformational journey, that this study seeks to illuminate.

Interpretive research emphasises:

*...social interaction as the basis for knowledge. The researcher uses his or her skills as a social being to try and understand how others understand their world. Knowledge, in this view, is constructed by mutual recognition and it is specific to the situation being investigated...those engaged in research within the interpretivist paradigm are pursuing the second human cognitive interest, namely, the interest in understanding the meaning behind something.
(O'Donoghue, 2006:10)*

In interpretive research, reality is seen as subjectively constructed by individuals, with multiple perspectives potentially leading to multiple meanings. Underpinned by hermeneutics and phenomenology, interpretivism, 'describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon' (Creswell, 1998:51). Qualitative methodologies, such as interviewing and documentary analysis, are used to gather information with the aim being, 'to document the world from the point of view of the people studied' (Hammersley, 1992:165) and to acknowledge its complexities and paradoxes.

Critical Postmodernism assumes that social reality is historically constituted and produced, and reproduced, by people. Although people can consciously act to change their social and economic circumstances, their ability to do so is constrained by social, cultural and political influences. Critical Postmodernism seeks to transcend taken-for-granted beliefs and attitudes by making these visible, and encouraging self-conscious, reflective criticism. Its paradigm encourages researchers to question and evaluate cultural, political

and gender assumptions. Understanding is then looked for within a social context, with ideas and values being deconstructed and then reconstructed in alternative, often more socially just, forms. As Reeves and Hedberg (2003:33) put it, 'This paradigm is a force of liberation that engages in ongoing conflict with the powers of oppression and seeks to bring about educational reform.'

The philosophical assumptions underlying this research project are interpretivist with a phenomenological underpinning. The fact that participants are evaluating cultural and political beliefs, (the efficacy of the academies' programme, its origins, and place within a neo-liberal agenda and its impact on the structure of education), whilst reflecting on their own pre-conceptions and beliefs, might suggest elements of Critical Postmodernism. However, there is no call for liberation within this research project nor any ongoing conflict with the forces of authority.

3.3 Rationale for a Qualitative Study

Maxwell (1998:75) describes five research purposes for which qualitative studies are particularly useful: understanding the meaning that participants in a study give to events, situations and actions they are involved with; understanding the particular context within which people act; the influence of context on action; identifying anticipated phenomena and influences whilst generating new theories about them; and understanding the process by which events and actions take place, whilst developing causal explanations. These purposes have particular relevance to this study, with its focus on: the meaning people assign to events and situations (motivations and decision making about whether to join a MAT); the importance of context (schools from different backgrounds and phases); and identifying anticipated influences (what factors affect the conversion process/ the effect of changing government legislation). Merriam (1988:49) points out that qualitative research can change and influence existing theory in that, 'Findings are usually discussed in relation to existing knowledge (some of which is theory) with the aim of demonstrating how the present study has contributed to

expanding the knowledge base.’ This is directly relevant to one of my research aims - the identification of the key issues for schools considering joining a MAT and how these can most effectively be addressed before, during, and after the conversion process.

3.4 Rationale for a Case Study

Mason (1996) suggests the following questions should be asked when selecting an appropriate methodology:

- (1) What data sources and methods of data generation are potentially available or appropriate?*
 - (2) What can these methods and sources feasibly tell me?*
 - (3) Which phenomena and components or properties of social ‘reality’ might these data sources and methods potentially help me to address?*
 - (4) Which of my research questions could they help me address?*
- (Mason, 1996:20-21)*

whilst for Yin (1989:19), ‘The first and most important condition for differentiating among the various research strategies is to identify the type of research questions being asked.’ Yin (2009:5) identifies five different research strategies and their criteria for use, reproduced in the diagram below:

Table 3.1 Rationale for a case study

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Form of Research Question</i>	<i>Requies Control Over Behavioural Events?</i>	<i>Focuses on Contemporary Events?</i>
Experiment	how, why	yes	yes
Survey	who, what, where, how many, how much	no	yes
Archival analysis (e.g., economic study)	who, what, where, how many, how much	no	yes/no
History	how, why	no	no
Case Study	how, why	no	yes

Source: Case Study Research: Design and Methods - Fourth Edition, 2009, Robert K. Yin

With my focus on contemporary events, and 'how', 'why' and 'what' questions, case study methodology seemed most appropriate. Case study is also particularly useful for bringing understanding to a complex issue by extending experience and adding detail to what is known through previous research. Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) provide a useful outline of the key aspects of case study research:

- *Case study as Research Genre;*
- *Bounded unit - a person, a group, an institution or organization;*
- *Located within personal, professional, local and national communities;*
- *Involves interactions, communications, relationships and practices between the case and the wider world and vice versa;*
- *Focus on collecting rich data - capturing the complexity of case;*
- *Data may be collected over extended periods with repeated collections or may be collected during an intensive but short period of time;*
- *Requires spending time within the world of those being researched;*
- *Uses a variety of data collection tools (interviews, observations, reflective journals and others) and different perspectives (child, teacher, parent, researcher) to provide depth;*
- *Employs two or more forms of data collection tool and/or two or more perspectives. This helps to triangulate the data and reinforces the legitimacy of the conclusions drawn.*
(Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013:11)

These elements were relevant to my research project with its focus on two groups of people (Governors and Senior Leaders) and their interactions, communications and relationships within the professional world of teachers and schools. There was a focus on rich data collection over a period of 24 months with a variety of data collection tools, (questionnaires and interviews), being utilised to triangulate and confirm evidence. For Stake (1995), there are four defining characteristics of qualitative case studies: 'holistic', 'empirical', 'interpretive' and 'emphatic.' 'Holistic' means researchers should consider the links between the phenomenon and its contexts. 'Empirical' means researchers base their study on observations in the field. 'Interpretive' treats research as basically a researcher-subject interaction, whilst 'Emphatic' reflects the different experiences of the subjects. For Merriam (1988:16), the defining characteristics of a case study are its combination of, 'Particularistic' (focusing on a particular situation, event or phenomenon); 'Descriptive' (producing a rich, thick description of

the subject being studied) and 'Heuristic' (increasing the reader's understanding of the phenomenon). According to Yazan (2015:150), this awareness of different case study approaches affords the researcher, '...the opportunity to eclectically combine elements (e.g. different research techniques and strategies) from each approach that best serve and support their design.'

For this research project, I found Merriam's (1988:xiii) constructivist approach most useful, especially with its focus on longitudinal studies where different variables can interact and affect each other. The journey of three standalone schools towards the formation of a MAT is, 'an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bonded phenomenon' including, in this case, 'an institution, a person, a process' and, unlike in Yin's (2002) definition, there are clear boundaries between phenomenon and context. Similarly, whereas Stake (1995:xi) talks of the, 'study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances', I was looking at multiple cases with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks emerging from, and contributing to, the literature. Whilst Yin (2002) suggests that quantitative and qualitative evidentiary sources should be combined, both Merriam (1988) and Stake (1995) focus exclusively on qualitative data sources. These were my primary data collection methods. Furthermore, when analysing the data, I was closest to Merriam's (1988:30) observation that qualitative case studies, '...can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience, or confirm what is known.'

Within the work of Merriam (1988) and Stake (1995) there are multiple versions of knowledge. As a result, disclosure of researcher bias, the use of 'thick description', and the explanation of the researcher's position in relation to the study, take on a heightened importance. All of these were central to my own methodology, combining my insider role with an exploration of the motivations, drivers, emotions and experiences of Governors and Senior Leaders. These perceptions and concerns would be lost in a quantitative

study. Moreover, whilst case study research is frequently criticised for failing to pass 'empirical and logical' tests (Stake, 1978:6), I was not looking to produce definitive generalisations but the illumination of a social situation through exploring the insights of its participants. Throughout, however, I was mindful of Hammersley's (1992:182) warning that, 'the process of inquiry...is the same whatever method is used, and the retreat into paradigms effectively stultifies debate and hampers progress.'

3.5 Single or Multiple Case Study

A multiple case study was used for this study as it enabled data to be compared across different types of school and similarities and differences explored. Yin (2003) sees this ability to compare data within, and across, case studies as enhancing the validity and reliability of the research; Baxter and Jack (2008) claiming that cross-comparisons make for more reliable and rigorous evidence. Generalisability can then be supported, with Gustafsson (2017:9) observing that, 'Multiple case studies allow a wider discovering of theoretical evolution and research questions.' Whilst for Dyer and Wilkins (1991), single case studies offer a better opportunity to study one person or group in detail, Eisenhardt (1991) argues that it is only through a multiple case study approach that a researcher can create convincing theories and clarify whether evidence is valuable or not.

In this research project, data was collected from a variety of sources allowing for greater depth and generalisability. Practically, however, I had to consider what could reasonably be asked of participating Governors and Senior Leaders. The degree of expectation and time commitment was significant, especially as there were three separate data collection trawls. Time can influence participation and so I was keen to keep this manageable. A further consideration was linked to the different statuses of the schools involved: one maintained, one foundation and one academy converter. A multiple case study offered the opportunity to see whether the journey towards MAT status differed dependent upon these backgrounds. There was also an interest in

seeing whether or not experiences, conceptions and perceptions were shared across case studies, with the ability to provide confirming or disconfirming evidence, a useful and interesting aspect of this research project.

3.6 Generalisation in Case Study Research

Generalisation can be defined as the characteristic of a research project that asserts a sense of usefulness and significance beyond the parameters of the study. For Mason (1996):

I do not think that qualitative researchers should be satisfied with producing explanations which are idiosyncratic or particular to the limited empirical parameters of their study.... Qualitative research should [therefore] produce explanations which are generalizable in some way, or which have a wider resonance.
(Mason, 1996:6)

Stake (1995:7-8), on the other hand, argues, 'The real business of case study is particularisation' asserting, 'It is not uncommon for case study researchers to make assertions on a relatively small database, invoking the privilege and responsibility of interpretation' (Stake, 1995:12). For Hammersley (1992), comparisons with larger samples may allow the opportunity for representativeness of a single case, whilst to Lincoln and Guba (1985) it is the identification of 'thick description' that allows for the generalizability of case study research. As Bassey (1998) states:

Alone a fuzzy generalization is no more than the researcher's equivalent of the politician's sound-bite, and as such has little credence, but supported by a research account which makes clear the context of the statement and the justifying evidence, it provides a user-friendly account of research findings.
(Bassey, 1998:1)

3.7 Insider Research

In this research project I was an insider researcher in a position of power. This can not only affect the credibility and efficacy of the research, but have implications for issues of coercion, compliance and access. In this section I

will explore these issues in detail and describe the attempts made to minimise bias and address ethical concerns.

3.7.1 What Do We Mean by Insider Research?

It was Merton (1972) who first coined the phrases 'Insider doctrine' and 'Outsider doctrine'. Saidin and Yaacob (2016: 849-850) define the insider researcher as, 'someone who shares a particular characteristic such as gender, ethnicity or culture, whereas the outsider researcher could be defined as someone who does not share the characteristics mentioned above'. Another useful distinction is provided by Adler and Adler (1994) who regard the insider researcher as one of the members of the group being studied with the outsider researcher sitting outside. To Smyth and Holian (2008), being an insider means being embedded in a shared social setting and emotionally connected to the research participants, whilst to Sikes and Potts (2008:3), insider research is carried out by people who, 'before they begin to research already have an attachment to, or involvement with, the institutions or social groups in, or on, which their investigations are based.'

Regardless of the distinctions above, there is a tendency amongst many researchers (Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002; McNamee and Bridges, 2002; Smyth and Holian, 2008; Unluer, 2012) to separate research into what Olson (1977:171) refers to as, 'two mutually exclusive frames of reference.' Merton (1972) believes that both groups should not be separated, arguing that two individuals of the same gender do not necessarily share the same opinions, with McCulloch (2008:51) pointing out that it is not always obvious who is inside and who is outside and that an insider can become an outsider when researching their own community. For DeVault (1996:35), identities are, 'always relative, cross cut by other differences and often situational and contingent' rejecting the insider/outsider dichotomy proposed by Olson (1977) in favour of a continuum with the two terms considered as end points. The boundaries between the two are both 'permeable' (Merton, 1972:37), and 'highly unstable' (Mullings, 1999:338), with the result that we are all

'multiple insiders and outsiders' (Deutsch, 1981:174), moving across and through different boundaries, 'as situations involving different values arise, different statuses are activated and the lines of separation shift' (Merton, 1972:28).

Mercer (2007) claims:

Insiderness depends, rather, upon the intersection of many different characteristics, some inherent and some not. The researcher's relationship with the researched is not static, but fluctuates constantly, shifting back and forth along a continuum of possibilities, from one moment to the next, from one location to the next, from one interaction to the next, and even from one discussion topic to the next (Mercer, 2007:13)

whilst Pugh, Mitchell and Brooks (2000) suggest that a research partnership between an insider and an outsider would balance the advantages of both positions whilst minimising the disadvantages of each. Somewhat inevitably, weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of each, tempts us to judge one as better than the other. For as Mercer (2007:7) concludes, 'the more we perceive of them as points on a continuum, the more we are likely to value them both, recognising their potential strengths and weaknesses, in all manner of contexts.'

3.7.2 Perceived Advantages of Insider-Research

Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) identify three key advantages of being an insider researcher: having a greater understanding of the culture being studied and its politics; not disrupting the flow of social interaction unnaturally through research; and the ability to extract true data from participants as there is a prior relationship. These were all relevant to my study. Speaking the same insider language, understanding local power, knowledge and methods, knowing whom best to ask, and obtaining access to conduct research, follow-up questions and scrutinise documents are also seen as beneficial (Herrmann, 1989; Tedlock, 2000; Rooney, 2005; Coghlan, 2007). As Smyth and Holian (2008) point out:

...research conducted from within is worthwhile and special because it can help solve practical problems. It forces us to ground our work in everyday issues as those involved experience them, it confronts us and others with our assumptions, perceptions and their consequences.... Above all, it is about learning and making a difference.
(Smyth and Holian, 2008:34)

According to Drever (1995), in order for insider-research to be successful, the researcher must be aware that any information shared depends upon the participants' view of the researcher and the nature of the research; Saidin and Yaacob (2016:851) pointing out that, 'This means that the researcher himself [sic] is an important factor in deciding about how much information he would get from participants.' The extent to which an insider alters the research process is debatable. Hawkins (1990) suggests insider-researchers who continue to perform their normal roles within an organisation will have more impact on the research than an outsider, whilst for Hockey (1993:204), insiders can, 'blend into situations, making them less likely to alter the research setting.' Partly this depends on the position of influence the researcher holds within the institution - in my case as CEO designate - the significance of the role could not be underestimated. For as Drever (1995:31) concludes, 'people's willingness to talk to you, and what people say to you, is influenced by who they think you are.'

3.7.3 Perceived Disadvantages of Insider-Research

There are many disadvantages cited to being an insider-researcher. These particularly surround issues of objectivity and questions of 'prejudice' and 'truth' in research (Simmel, 1950) and the potential of bias (DeLyser, 2001; Hewitt-Taylor, 2002). It is frequently argued that the insider-researcher can be subconsciously influenced through having a similar background and experience to participants, thereby influencing the interpretation of data. Schulz (1971) sees the insider-researcher as more biased than an outsider-researcher who has no prior background information on a topic, thereby increasing objectivity. Greater familiarity can make insider-researchers more likely to take things for granted, ignore assumptions and not challenge shared

norms (Platt, 1981; Hockey, 1993). These were all issues that I had to consider and address.

Researchers who undertake research from within may face accusations of bias. This is owing to the inherent subjectivity associated with their role and existing knowledge (Sikes and Potts, 2008; Floyd and Arthur, 2012). Unlike outsiders, insider researchers consider the extent to which their insider knowledge enables them to question an interviewee's account and whether the challenging of facts is acceptable. Whilst insider status may confer privileged access and information, the researcher's position may also act as a constraint, limiting who is willing to participate and what is revealed (Smyth and Holian, 2008). Moreover, working at the same organisation as respondents, does not necessarily mean a shared vernacular and language - Alvesson (2002) noting how organisational culture may be contested by individuals and groups - with diverse subcultures operating within the same institution. There is also the issue of role duality with the researcher struggling to balance the insider and researcher roles and people being unclear about the respective status of each. A practitioner is actively engaged in an organisation, whereas a researcher needs to stand back and consider the evidence - what Drake (2010) refers to as the difference between building sandcastles and looking at a coastal map.

Anonymity is frequently problematic for insider researchers. Trowler (2011:3) suggests, 'It is normally best to assume that the reader will be able to identify your institution, should they wish to.' Tolich (2004) distinguishes between external confidentiality - ensuring the participant remains anonymous and internal confidentiality - the risk that people in the research might identify each other, Floyd and Arthur (2012:3) noting, 'the below surface, murky issues that arise during and after the research process linked to ongoing personal and professional relationships with participants, insider knowledge, conflicting professional and researcher roles and anonymity.' Insider researchers have to live with the consequences of their actions if they continue to work for the organisation and cannot dismiss what they have

heard. Access to privileged information can be misused with Floyd and Arthur (2012) pointing out the pressure to display visual cues of agreement with a participant or the need to continue with professional relationships after the research ends. For McCulloch (2008:74), you can never leave the field if you work there, 'Perhaps the best that they can hope for is sufficient time and space away from their normal work environments to review, analyse, and report their findings in a fair and balanced manner.'

3.7.4 Insider Knowledge

Insider knowledge is the knowledge and understanding people have through working in a particular role. I approached this research with the experience of ten years working as a Headteacher within the maintained, foundation and academy sectors. For me, the journey towards a MAT was something I was already interested in. For Adam (2013) sharing similarity with the context and research phenomena is related to insider-knowledge, with factors including knowledge, insights, and lived experiences of daily life in the research context (Kanuha, 2000; Coghlan, 2007; Roth, Shani and Leary, 2007). As an insider, I knew intimately how one school proposing to join the trust operated and many of the personnel within its governance. The other two schools I knew less well. It was tempting, therefore, in terms of access, to approach people I already knew or had worked with previously. However, I was conscious of the dangers of bias, Drake (2010) observing how, as an insider, she positioned herself as a research respondent in ways that resonated with her own work, rather than that of the respondents.

The decision to keep a reflective journal and involve an expert peer-reviewer, (a retired university lecturer, familiar with the ethical considerations of research, and able to comment on my interviewing technique, pilot study and data analysis), were instrumental in enabling me to constantly review how, and why, I was doing things. Furthermore, this objective viewpoint further enhanced the robustness of my methodology, through examination and justification of my methods, challenging my assumptions and following the data trail from collection to conclusion. Gummesson, (2000:54) talks of the

importance of 'pre-understanding' of people's knowledge and experiences, my contextual familiarity enabling me to approach the project with a deeper and more insightful investigation of the issues and unspoken aspects that might have eluded an outsider.

3.7.5 Professional and Research Roles

Floyd and Arthur (2012:8) claim, 'There are likely to be tensions for insiders between their role as a professional practitioner and researcher.' Working as an insider allowed me to access a range of detailed information, both formal and informal. However, this also led to a number of challenges, including over-familiarity with the research context and participants (DeLyser, 2001), and 'entanglement' (Adam, 2013:5). Takeda (2012) argues that these issues are mainly generated through a researcher's positioning in the research process. For me, the insider position was particularly challenging because of the nature of my methodology, which emphasised understanding of what Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011:93) called, the 'lived reality' of the participants. Gaining access was relatively straightforward. Gaining trust less so. The advantage of being close to the data source meant that I could complete a more in-depth and detailed analysis of the MAT transfer process. However, respondents frequently confused my roles and talked to me about my research outside of the data collection points. At times, I found it difficult to disentangle what was discussed anecdotally and what was shared as part of the research process. I also had to be aware of role ambiguity as, during data collection, I was both a researcher and designate leader of the MAT.

For Berger (2013:13), 'researchers must continually ask themselves where they are at any given moment in relation to what they study and what are the potential ramifications of this position on their research.' I actively tried to separate my researcher and professional roles, explaining the distinction before data collection, and producing a clear ethical statement. However, it was difficult to judge how far this was accepted, my reflective journal, referencing any uneasiness and conflicts that might affect data analysis. This reflexivity was an important part of my research journey, enabling me to

consider the advantages, disadvantages, contradictions and convolutions of being an insider researcher, whilst keeping awareness of bias to the fore.

3.7.6 Impartiality and Bias

Perhaps the biggest criticism of insider-research is the issue of bias and a perceived lack of impartiality, the implicit assumption being that greater familiarity leads to a lack of objectivity. According to Smyth and Holian (2008):

To conduct credible insider research, insider-researchers must constitute an explicit awareness of the possible effects of perceived bias on data collection and analysis, respect the ethical issues related to the anonymity of the organization and individual participants and consider and address the issues about the influencing researcher's insider role on coercion, compliance and access to privileged information, at each and every stage of the research.
(Smyth and Holian, 2008:28)

Smyth and Holian (2008) question whether research from within can or should be objective whilst, for Hennigh (1981), becoming a stranger to those you are familiar with creates an unhelpful artificial situation - insider-researchers should remain familiar - whilst outsider-researchers should provide the needed perspective of a stranger.

For many researchers, (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; McCulloch, 2008; Smyth and Holian, 2008), there can be no purely objective observation of human behaviour in work situations, as all observation is theory and value laden and dependent on past experiences. The very process of selecting what is being researched, and how that research will be conducted, adversely affects objectivity. Nor is this a situation unique to insider-researchers who at least critique and explain the organisation being studied and their relationship towards it. After all, just because a report is written in the third person does not necessarily make it objective, but does make it impossible for a reader to evaluate the influence of personal factors and biases.

For Smyth and Holian (2008):

This enables observations and learnings to be grounded in the very often messy and difficult to access multiple realities of organizational life, rather than filtered through a research approach concerned with only admitting data that is regarded as objective, measurable and triangulated.
(Smyth and Holian, 2008:37)

In this research project, the use of multiple case studies, methods and data, triangulation, pilot studies, reflective journal and expert peer review enabled issues of impartiality and bias to remain omnipresent throughout.

3.8 Power

Commentators such as Ball (1994), Kogan (cited in Walford, 1994) and Walford (2011) have written in detail about interviewing the powerful and the potential ethical considerations and challenges that arise from research focused on elites. However, much less has been written about the power imbalances that can affect educational research when the person conducting the research also holds a position of power within an organisation.

In non-positivist paradigms, such as constructivism and critical theory, research is often seen as a researcher-participant joint venture with a blurred division between researcher and subject. Whereas methods of qualitative inquiry, such as case study and ethnography, emphasise the commonality of researcher-participant relationships, others, such as the feminist tradition, look to remove the imbalance of power between the researcher and respondent, (Brayton, 1997), and replace ownership of research with participation. As Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009:281) note, 'Relationships are affected by the content of the inquiry, and equally by the institutional context in which the study is carried out and by researchers' and participants' personal motivations.' Similarly, participants' co-operation can be influenced by a variety of factors, including whether a person has control or power over them (Peel, Parry, Douglas and Lawton, 2006). Fedoruk (2017:1) identifies the key question as, 'What power relationships need to be taken into account

in negotiating roles, permissions and involvements by various participants in your work? Are there issues of gender, race, culture, and status differences that need to be especially taken into account?' This was of particular relevance for the design of my research project, with Fook et al. (2000) observing that a 'request' to participate in research may be seen as a 'requirement' if made by someone in a position of authority. For Governors and Directors, the power-relationship was less clear as, whilst I had previously held a position of influence and significance over staff in one institution, Governors arguably held power over me as my employer.

A limitation of much of the research into power relationships is that roles are seen as static and fixed. Rather like the diametrically opposed positions of the insider/outsider debate, assumptions are frequently made that there is an unvarying hierarchy with the researcher and participant occupying the same roles throughout. In reality, I did not find this to be the case. The longitudinal nature of this research project led to changes in power relations as the study developed. These are discussed in detail later in this chapter.

3.9 Sampling

To Morse and Niehaus (2009), sampling methods are intended to maximize efficiency and validity and reflect differences in methodology. Patton (2002) has suggested 16 strategies for purposeful sampling within qualitative research claiming:

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling. Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations.
(Patton, 2002: 230)

It was these 'information-rich cases' examined by adopting an 'intensity-sampling' approach that I wished to explore. 'Intensity sampling' is most appropriate when there are rich examples of the phenomenon of interest but

the cases are not unusual or deviant. The study of three 'typical' state-run schools and the MAT provides for this in-depth study, whilst avoiding those anomalies, Patton (2002) identifies as negatively affecting generalisability.

Patton (2002:161) points out that, 'Because research and evaluations often serve multiple purposes, more than one qualitative sampling strategy may be necessary.' This research project also combined elements of Convenience Sampling - the schools were familiar and easy to access - and Opportunistic Sampling - the three schools were starting their conversions at the same time. They also offered a mixture of primary and secondary provision to enhance the depth and richness of the study and had different backgrounds. This latter point was particularly important as it offered an opportunity to compare and contrast schools with very different educational experiences, and to evaluate the significance and importance of where each journey began. It also further enhanced opportunities for generalisability by offering comparison across the different case studies.

3.10 Participant Recruitment

In terms of the questionnaire, this was relatively straightforward. All 30 Governors, (12 from School A and nine from each of Schools B and C), and all 12 Senior Leaders, (six from school A and three from each of Schools B and C), received the questionnaire through SurveyMonkey. The questionnaire was administered three times: at the beginning of the conversion process, at the point of conversion and 12 months after the MAT's formation.

For School A, responses were received from all 12 Governors and the six Senior Leaders with the nine Governors and the three Senior Leaders from School B also responding. For School C, responses were received from six Governors and three Senior Leaders. Across the three schools, the same number of responses from Governors and Senior Leaders were received at each of the data collection points. The questionnaire was anonymized but allowed responses to be grouped by school/respondent type for comparison

purposes. For interviews, the Chair of Governors and Headteacher of each school were selected as they were central to the conversion process, and it was felt that their insights would produce invaluable evidence, alongside six other Governors across the three schools. Of the remaining Senior Leaders, three were interviewed from the secondary school, and one from each of the primary schools, to reflect the difference in size between the institutions. The selection of these six Governors and five Senior Leaders was made randomly. Each interview was conducted three times and linked back to the data set for that school. Overall, therefore, at each data collection point, there were 30 questionnaires issued and 17 interviews conducted.

In the initial stages of participant recruitment, control over the research process lay with me: I chose how to describe the research process and which information to provide (Whitmore, 1994). However, even at this early stage, power relationships were shifting. Despite my knowledge of the project, I was still dependent upon participants' consent, with several challenging the dates and timings of interviews to ensure attendance at their convenience. Others asked for more information about the project and the use of the findings. Dawson and Kass (2005) question the degree to which 'informed consent' can ever be a reality when there is a clear power imbalance between researcher and researched. To overcome some of these concerns, I provided a written description of the research project (included in Appendix B) and its aims and objectives were clearly communicated to each participant. This written description clarified roles, responsibilities and rights of both the participant and researcher at each stage of the project and the uses of information. It also included an 'Ethical Statement' (included in Appendix C). In terms of my role as CEO designate of the future MAT, I emphasised throughout that this was a research project being undertaken by myself, not as CEO designate, but as a researcher, and asked participants to try and separate the two roles. All interviews were also held in a neutral location, and outside of school time, in an attempt to further enhance a sense of separation.

3.11 Ethics

Ethical considerations are usually more complex in qualitative research than quantitative research. This is partly because qualitative research frequently involves more personal methods, such as interviewing, and is more intrusive into participants' everyday worlds. Silverman (2000:201) points out how, in a qualitative study, the researcher enters the private space of participants - their personal domains of values, weaknesses, individual learning disabilities and the like to collect data. This raises a variety of ethical issues that need to be addressed before, during, and after the research has been conducted.

The ESRC (2015) 'Framework for Research Ethics' sets out six core ethical principles that are outlined below:

1. Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity and quality.

This study is important as it looks at the impact of a government policy upon three schools from different backgrounds and the drivers, motivations, opportunities and concerns in forming a MAT. The integrity and quality of the research is ensured by using multiple sources of data, triangulating evidence, pilot studies, expert peer review and established methods of data storage, analysis and validation.

During the period of this study, in May 2018, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) came into force. Under GDPR, participants are entitled to know how, and why, their personal data is being stored, to what uses it is being put, and to whom it may be made available. Researchers must have participants' explicit permission to disclose personal information to third parties and are required to ensure that such parties are permitted to have access to that information. They are also required to independently confirm the identity of such persons to their own satisfaction and keep a record of any disclosures. The GDPR defines data as, 'any information relating to an identified or identifiable person' (ICO; 2018: para.11). However, whilst it could be argued that, with the possible exception of the Chairs of

Governors/Headteachers, no individual was identifiable, and therefore, GDPR regulations did not apply, it was felt that handling different sets of data in different ways could easily lead to issues of transference and confusion. As a result, all data used in this study was collected, stored and analysed in accordance with GDPR principles. On all published information about the project, an appropriate independent contact was identified to whom any questions, complaints or concerns could be raised. No concerns were reported.

2. Research staff and subjects must be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved.

There were no risks identified within this project, other than that of possible identification for Chairs of Governors and Headteachers, as their questionnaires and interviews were not anonymised. Each agreed to sign a 'waiver', (reproduced in Appendix D), and I explained that I would use my best endeavours to ensure anonymity in the write up and dissemination of findings. Gender identities were also changed during the write up.

The BERA (2018) *Ethical Guidelines* state that:

Researchers should do everything they can to ensure that all potential participants understand, as well as they can, what is involved in a study. They should be told why their participation is necessary, what they will be asked to do, what will happen to the information they provide, how that information will be used and how and to whom it will be reported.
(BERA; 2018:9)

This was achieved through respondents being provided with an information sheet (reproduced in Appendix B) about the study prior to each set of questionnaires being issued and before the beginning of the interviews. This information sheet outlined the purpose, requirement and commitment required of respondents, with an undertaking that the information would form part of a research project that might be published but only with all sources anonymised. It was also made clear that no data would be shared

with secondary sources. An 'Ethical Statement' (found in Appendix C) was also shared with all respondents. This clearly set out the 'Researcher's Rights and Responsibilities' and what actions would be taken to promote and share these. All respondents signed and returned a copy of this statement to demonstrate their agreement and understanding. As there could be a gap of up to 12 months between data collection points, the 'Ethical Statement' was re-issued before each new round of questionnaires and interviews, with each respondent signing again to agree to its terms.

3. The confidentiality of information supplied by research subjects and the anonymity of respondents must be respected.

The 'Ethical Statement' outlined how confidentiality would be protected. This included procedures for access to, collection, storage and destruction of data. The questionnaire was issued through SurveyMonkey but with 'anonymous responses' enabled so that individuals could not be identified. Pseudonyms were also used for all schools and respondents with the use of written and spoken exchanges in line with the 'Information Provision' section of 'Researcher's Responsibilities.' It was also made clear that there were limits to confidentiality if I had any concern of a possible risk of harm. As previously mentioned, the questionnaires and interviews of the Chairs of Governors and Headteachers were not anonymised with a waiver agreed and signed. In this decision, I was reflecting the BERA (2018:21) Ethical Guidelines that, '...in some circumstances individual participants...may want to specifically and willingly waive their right to confidentiality and anonymity: researchers should recognise participants' rights to be identified in any publication of their original works or other inputs if they so wish.' Anonymity was also a concern in terms of institutional recognition. BERA (2018:21) notes, 'Similarly, when researching a very well-known institution, it may be possible for some readers to infer the identity of that institution even from a fully anonymised account of that research.' The institutions chosen for this study were not particularly well known but, with three case studies in a relatively small city, identification was still a possibility, hence the name of the city being deliberately withheld.

4. Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion.

Principle Four of the ESRC 'Framework for Research Ethics' states, 'Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion' (ESRC, 2015). Respect for consent or refusal helps to prevent harm, including participants feeling deceived, exploited or wrong. The BERA (2018) ethical guidelines explain:

It is normally expected that participants' voluntary informed consent to be involved in a study will be obtained at the start of the study, and that researchers will remain sensitive and open to the possibility that participants may wish, for any reason and at any time, to withdraw their consent.
(BERA; 2018:9)

Through issuing the 'Ethical Statement' at the start of each round of data collection, with its clearly highlighted statement that consent was voluntary, it was made explicit to participants that they could withdraw at any time without explanation. Owing to my position of influence and power within the organisation, it was of even greater importance that participants were aware that participation was voluntary. As a result, a disclaimer in the email introducing each online questionnaire re-stated the voluntary nature of completion, whilst each interview was prefaced with a statement that the respondent was free to withdraw, at any time, without prejudice.

Hurd (1996) describes how consent requires both the capacity to withhold and the capacity to understand what is being consented to. During this research project, consent was ongoing - not a simple 'yes' or 'no' tick box at the beginning. It was important to give respondents time to reflect before deciding whether or not to participate. The expert peer-reviewer observed that one drawback of having a 'disclaimer' at the start of data collection was that respondents were, by then, actively engaged in the process therefore making the act of withdrawal more difficult. As the expert peer-reviewer put it, 'You might subconsciously be making them feel awkward and, in extreme cases, making them feel unable to say no.' To mitigate against this, I issued the

'Ethical Statement' two weeks before each round of questionnaires and interviews, re-emphasising that participation was entirely voluntary.

The BERA (2018:13) Ethical Guidelines point out how, 'An important consideration is the extent to which a researcher's reflective research into their own practice impinges upon others - for example, in the case of power relationships....' These were addressed by making the researcher's role explicit, involving an independent expert peer-reviewer in the process, and ensuring my own identity remained confidential in anything written. BERA (2018:13) also state, 'Researchers...should also consider how to address any tensions arising between collecting data for different purposes - for example, using for research purposes data collected for evaluation purposes, or vice versa' whilst:

*In advance of data collection, researchers have a responsibility to think through their duty of care in order to recognise potential risks, and to prepare for and be in a position to minimise and manage any distress or discomfort that may arise.
(BERA; 2018:19)*

Despite the fact that I was dealing with adults, I was careful to record in my reflective journal, after each set of interviews, whether I had any concerns. For example, one entry following the first set of interviews notes, 'Respondent very nervous. Seems more concerned with getting the answers right than with what is being said.' Following this, I was careful to review the questions for the second set of interviews and spend longer at the beginning putting the interviewee at ease; my field notes after the second interview stating, 'respondent seemed more relaxed and happier to engage'.

5. Harm to research participants must be avoided.

During this research project, I looked to minimise harm to research participants and, despite this study not dealing with particularly sensitive issues, informed consent, right to withdraw and confidentiality were emphasised throughout. As 'harm' can be interpreted differently by different

people, I was careful to reflect after each set of interviews, and in the drawing up of questions, whether there was anything that might prove controversial. The issue of cultural sensitivity emerged during one interview when I questioned a foreign-born national, who had recently joined an LGB, as to their prior knowledge of the academies' programme. It quickly became obvious that this was a question outside of their cultural frame of reference. Of greater concern was their apparent discomfort - obviously feeling that they *should* have been aware. As a result, I was careful to reassure them and move onto other questions. It was obviously of central importance to uphold respondents' dignity, rights, confidentiality, anonymity and privacy and I felt concerned here that someone was clearly uncomfortable.

Ensuring anonymity, whilst requesting written permission from individuals who would be quoted directly, also avoided harm with the risk of reputational damage minimised by using pseudonyms for each case study. The 'Ethical Statement' explicitly outlined my rights and responsibilities as a researcher allowing any concerns to be addressed in advance, whilst access to an independent complaints' email allowed respondents to raise any issues of concern with a third party, working as a consultant, who had received ethical awareness training.

6. The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.

My role as an insider-researcher in a position of influence was made explicit throughout this study. For the insider-researcher, what is unusual may actually be 'normal' and not given due importance. Rooney (2005) asks three questions of insider-researchers: whether their relationships with subjects negatively impacts on behaviour so they do not perform normally; whether the researcher's prior knowledge distorts results leading to misinterpretations; and whether hidden politics or agendas lead the researcher to interpret, or disregard, important data. For Homan (2002), it is imperative that insider researchers should not be their own gatekeepers. By using established procedures for acquiring data, and informed consent, I

attempted to mitigate some of these concerns. Similarly, by having a clear outline of the project and its intentions, piloting each questionnaire and interview, keeping accurate records and transcripts of all data, and having a logical structure for data analysis and validation, I looked to explicitly address issues of bias.

In this research project, the expert-peer reviewer fulfilled the 'gatekeeper' function by reviewing data, shadowing interviews and asking questions that made me continually evaluate my own role and actions. Caruana (2015:71) observes that, 'An exercise in becoming aware of one's own values and biases is fundamental towards increasing the validity of the research itself', and my reflective journal was also useful in challenging my own thinking. For example, following the second round of pilot interviews, I noted the following: 'Question regarding context of school makes tacit assumption that conversion was a positive. Need to change emphasis' and 'My prior knowledge explicit in question - change phrasing.' Perhaps, inevitably, impartiality and independence are difficult to prove for both insider and outsider researchers. However, by treating these ethical issues as ongoing throughout the project, I looked to ensure factual accuracy and minimise the misinterpretation of data.

3.12 Data Collection

During the data collection process, control and ownership of information resided with the participants and it was their decision whether to share this. Kvale (1996), cited in Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009), argues that qualitative interviews can conceal power differences, and that the dialogue that takes place in the interviewing process may be a cover for the exercise of power. In his view, power lies in the hands of the interviewer who directs the research project, sets the agenda and dictates the conversation. In my experience, the idea of the researcher having total power was only partially true. Depending upon my relationship with those being interviewed, the focus of the conversation could shift, (Hutchison and Skodol-Wilson, 1992), and the

respondent could always choose to end the interview and withdraw their participation. During data collection, and through the feedback obtained from the pilot studies, I was able to rephrase and reframe my interview questions in order to reflect the participants' experiences and capabilities (Myers and Newman, 2007; Schultze and Avital, 2010), whilst showing my awareness of the implications of power. One method that I found particularly successful was to acknowledge the limitations of the research and method being employed and allow for criticism of this during the interviews (Bravo-Moreno, 2003). For example, during my second round of interviews with Governors, the following exchange took place:

Interviewer (Int): *I understand the difficulty in trying to separate my role as CEO and my role as researcher, but I would ask you to try and do this. Everything we discuss is confidential and there will be no names in the final report.*

Respondent (Res): *Well that's easy to say but you cannot unhear things, can you? It's not like you will have your memory erased following this interview. It is not an issue for me, but it might be if I were a member of staff under your direction.*

Int: *I cannot disagree. It is a limitation. What I have done to offset this is try and put people at ease, interview in a different location to where I work, have a written framework of rights, responsibilities and ethics and emphasise confidentiality and anonymity. I also remind people at each stage about the nature of this project and its possible uses. But you are right in that I cannot control how people will respond to me and my professional role may undoubtedly have a bearing.*

In many ways, this brief exchange summed up a key dilemma. It also showed how the governor viewed power as a determinant - not for them, personally, but for anyone over whom I exercised control or authority. Inevitably, the respective positions in the hierarchy of researcher and participant are likely to influence the research process, irrespective of who is more senior. As a

result, I built in further safeguards, including asking the expert peer-reviewer to shadow two interviews and evaluate the data-analysis process. Transcripts were also provided to confirm agreement and understanding of the information collected. For Forbat and Henderson (2005:1124), 'although sharing transcripts might be driven by a desire to empower participants in the process, it can be experienced as threatening: underlining speakers' ungrammatical style and prompting worry over how they are represented.' In practice, I did not find this to be a difficulty as conversations were simply transcribed verbatim. I was only asked on one occasion to revise a statement by a respondent following review. In fact, my biggest issue was a practical one: getting respondents to read the transcripts in the first place and then comment. It was a difficult balance at times between encouraging people to respond, and having to chase them up, without appearing too intrusive. On balance, I decided that the checking of transcripts was important. This was to ensure that respondents' voices were not distorted or enhanced. It also encouraged trustworthiness by giving participants a further opportunity to comment on what had been said, whilst also keeping their contribution to, and interest in, a research process that extended over a two-year period.

3.12.1 Questionnaires

Questionnaires were used in this research project as they allow for feedback from a large number of respondents. By providing questionnaires, in both electronic and paper form, it gave participants a choice of response methods and helped to support a higher return rate. Questionnaires allow data to be collected quickly, which was important in this research project, with its three data collection points, whilst also allowing responses to be collated rapidly for processing and analysis. Questionnaires do have limitations, however. There can be problems of interpretation and, even after running a pilot study, it is difficult to design questions to mitigate against this. Data processing and analysis for large samples can also be time consuming, whilst motivating potential respondents to complete questionnaires on time is frequently problematic. This last point was particularly resonant as I was administering

three sets of questionnaires, three times to the same group of people. Information that accompanied each questionnaire included: the purpose of the questionnaire; how it should be completed; how feedback would be used in the project; how respondents would be informed of the project's findings; any action that would be taken as a response to the project's findings; and how confidentiality, anonymity and data protection would be guaranteed. Each questionnaire had a maximum of ten questions because I wanted to achieve an appropriate balance between asking sufficient questions to get useful feedback, but not so many that respondents got bored or felt they had insufficient time to complete them.

There are two main types of questionnaire: structured and unstructured. Structured questionnaires are predominantly closed questions producing data that is quantitatively analysed for trends and patterns. The agenda is predetermined by the researcher and provides little flexibility for respondents. Unstructured questionnaires, on the other hand, whilst still having a structured sequence and focus, consist of open questions which allow respondents the freedom to answer in their own words and provide greater qualification to their responses. For this research project, I took a mixed approach and used a semi-structured questionnaire. I wanted to combine the benefits of the structured questionnaire, which allows for the exploration of patterns and trends that can be collated rapidly, with respondents' opinions, attitudes and feelings. I avoided highly structured, closed questions as, despite their amenability to statistical analysis, they were found in the pilot to be too restrictive. The majority of questions had a 'comment' box included with an opportunity for extended text. This has both advantages and disadvantages. Cohen et al. (2007) point out how:

*It is the open-ended responses that might contain the 'gems' of information that otherwise might not be caught in the questionnaire. However, an open-ended question can catch the authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty...which...are the hallmarks of qualitative data
(Cohen et al. 2007:330)*

but acknowledge this can lead to difficulties of aggregation and comparison. For some questions, I also asked for a 'top 3' or 'top 5' in terms of response. These 'rank order' questions identified different options from which respondents could choose, enabling them to indicate priorities and degrees of importance. As one aim of this research project was to identify those features that made successful transition into a MAT more likely, it was also important to gauge which processes and documentation respondents found most useful. As a result, some questions had 'clear', 'partially clear' and 'unclear' options. Whilst matrix questions have the advantage of allowing for a quick speed of response, a disadvantage can be the encouragement of a mind set in the respondent whereby they simply go down the questionnaire ticking the same answers, the same issue that often arises with 'Likert type' scales. To mitigate against this, I varied the order and type of question in each questionnaire.

In this study, three questionnaires were administered to the same sample of respondents at three separate intervals. These time frames were selected to reflect the rationale and aims of the research questions where I was looking at the motivations behind the initial decision, the experience of the journey itself, and what benefits, problems and lessons were evident 12 months later. (Copies of the three questionnaires can be found in Appendix E).

In designing the questionnaire, the first consideration was to ensure that questions could be easily understood by the respondent. To address this, the questions were based upon constructs revealed, and formulated and written in an easily accessible fashion. Questions were asked that respondents were likely to have prior knowledge of, whilst being open-ended enough to facilitate a free exchange of information. Secondly, the questionnaire was constructed in a manner that would be accessible to the respondent. Using SurveyMonkey, and providing a link for respondents, meant that they did not have to use a paper copy unless requested (in the pilot study the paper copy was frequently lost), nor remember to return it. It also meant that gentle reminders could be sent to respondents who had not completed the

questionnaire. This ensured a 40% higher response rate than in the pilot study. In terms of the questions asked, particular attention was paid to the sequencing so that there was a logical journey in a respondent's thinking. For example, on questionnaire 1, early questions asked about the key drivers and motivations for wanting to become an academy, and joining a MAT, before moving on to ask about perceived educational and operational benefits. All of the questions reflected emergent themes from the literature, with the questionnaire concluding with questions about communication and further support for the decision-making process. I was also very conscious of the need to avoid 'leading' questions such as, 'Do you prefer?' and the importance of clear, unambiguous language - two lessons from the pilot.

The issue of the ethical handling of the data was designed into the questionnaire and accompanying instructions. Questionnaires were administered anonymously, although allowing for the collation of data by school/respondent type. This was important, as one of the key aims of this research was to explore whether or not the conversion journey differed depending upon the status of the school transitioning. Following the pilot, the purpose of each questionnaire section was outlined with shorter, clearer instructions in an accompanying email. Particular attention was paid to clarity of wording, and simplicity of design, with the compressed nature of the first version changed to one with more space and visual prompts. Redline and Dillman (2002) suggest that the placing of response categories to the immediate right of the text increases the chance of it being answered, as the location is more visible, whilst the use of boldening and capitalisation increases the chances of questions being addressed. Version 2 of the questionnaire incorporated these changes.

3.12.2 Interviews

For Borg and Gall (1989):

The interview is a unique research method that involves the collection of data through direct verbal interaction between

individuals. The advantage of employing such a method is that the interview situation permits much greater depth than other methods of collecting data.
(Borg and Gall, 1989:231)

Patton (2002:278) concludes that interviewing enables the researcher, 'to enter into the other person's perspective' and that this perspective is, '...meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit', whilst Cohen and Manion (1989) regard interviews as serving three main research purposes: gathering information, testing hypothesis and acting as explanatory devices to help identify variables and relationships.

Pope (1989) sees the advantages of interviews as a research method as twofold: flexibility - interviews are the most versatile method of obtaining detached attitude and opinion information, and observation - an interviewer can observe an interviewee's reactions when asking questions. Anderson and Burns (1989) added three more: the interview provides a framework into which respondents' views and opinions can be placed, it allows the interviewee to present a holistic picture of themselves and not adopt one particular 'face' and, if they do adopt such a 'face', allows the interviewer to understand it better.

In this research project, interviews were also used to interrogate and develop the questionnaires' responses. Being able to probe deeper, understand a respondent's perspective, follow up queries, and test hypotheses arising from other data, was invaluable. Whilst questionnaires may allow for relatively easy, and accurate quantification, there is little flexibility for respondents to explore, justify or explain their answers. The interviews would, hopefully, overcome these limitations. Interviews, as a research instrument, are not without their critics, however. Questions of validity are commonplace and whether the qualitative information collected is reliable, accurate and more generally applicable. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) dismiss the concept of interview neutrality, seeing interviewers' biases and effects, accuracy of respondents' memories, social desirability and dishonesty as ever-present

limitations. Latham and Sarri (1984) highlight the difference between what people say, what they do, and what they say they do, with Punch (2009:90) pointing out, 'We know that interviewers and interviewees co-construct the interview and the replies to questions are produced for that particular occasion and circumstance.' Trying to mitigate against these concerns, whilst minimising bias, became central to my research instrument design.

Hochschild (2009) describes two types of interviews: elite and intensive. Elite interviews, usually in the form of mass surveys, are designed to collect, analyse and classify data statistically, whilst intensive interviews probe in depth the particular knowledge of a small number of respondents. Whatever typology is used, the distinction is the degree of structure to the interview and the depth of the questioning. Patton (2002) refers to 'informal conversational', 'general guide approach' and 'standardised open ended' interview schedules, whilst Fielding (2003) prefers the three-way classification of 'standardised', 'non-standardised' and 'semi-standardised.' For my research, a semi-structured interview seemed most appropriate. This was because the primary purpose was to explore and discuss thinking and motivations and to further illuminate the questionnaire data. With a structured interview, questions are normally asked in a fixed order, with no deviation and flexibility, variation being minimised. Here I wanted to be able to explore explanations and ask follow-up questions - guiding the interview whilst also giving discussion free rein. This semi-structured approach allows for a question schedule to be adhered to, with key points covered, but also flexibly adjusted to capture the emerging narrative, 'In this manner, the individual's own interpretations and meanings are allowed to surface in the interview data' (Layder, 1993:41).

Creswell (2007) identifies three key components of an effective interview strategy: preparation, constructing effective research questions and implementation. In terms of preparation, one of my early concerns when designing the schedule was the selection and categorisation of respondents. Marshall (1996) describes three types of sampling strategy: 'convenience',

'judgment' and 'theoretical.' 'Convenience' involves interviewing the most accessible people; 'judgment' those most likely to be able to answer the questions; and 'theoretical' those most likely to support the researcher's proposed theories. For the pilot, I decided on a 'judgment' sampling strategy: as the purpose of the interviews was to enhance my understanding of the conversion process and what could be improved. This approach was also adopted in the main study.

Constructing effective interview questions, the second key component identified by Creswell (2007), proved more difficult than anticipated. McNamara (2009) concludes that wording should always be as open ended as possible in order for respondents to choose their own terms when answering. He also discusses keeping question wording neutral to avoid influencing answers. For example, on reviewing the question, 'What impact has the government's desire for all schools to join MATs had on your approach to the transfer process?', I realised that this implied cause and effect. As a result, I changed it to, 'Do you think that the government's desire for all schools to join MATs has affected your approach to the transfer process?' which enabled the interviewee to form their own opinion and removed the sense of the answer being predetermined.

Refining the interview schedule, after I had administered the questionnaire, was advantageous as I could see where further information was needed and tailor my questions accordingly. Whereas one of my original questions asked, 'What were the key drivers to becoming an academy?', an analysis of the rather superficial questionnaire responses made me realise this was an area that required more detailed exploration. Accordingly, I adjusted my interview schedule to incorporate follow-up questions about motivation and reasoning. If I had not administered the questionnaire first, I would not have known which questions needed asking and which data required further extrapolation. Walford (1994:6) talks of 'proximate preparation' for interviews whereby questions need to be reviewed and refined throughout the pilot process. In the pilot, the order of the questions worked well. I

realised the importance of having follow-up questions and prompts such as, 'Exactly what do you mean there?' and, 'What did you do then?' A mixture of questioning styles worked best with sometimes the simplest direct questions such as, 'What are the advantages in becoming an academy?' and, 'What are the disadvantages?' eliciting the most useful information. (Copies of the three sets of interview questions can be found in Appendix F).

3.13 Pilot Study

The pilot phases of the study were conducted two months prior to each data collection point. This gave enough time to adjust the questionnaires and interviews and to reflect on lessons learnt. For Yin (1989:81), 'The pilot case study helps investigators to refine their data collection plans with respect to both the content of the data and the procedures to be followed.' The pilot studies for this research project followed van Teijlingen and Huntley's (2001) suggestion that:

The first phase of a pilot might involve using in-depth interviews or focus groups to establish the issues to be addressed in a large-scale questionnaire survey. Next, the questionnaire, e.g. the wording and the order of the questions, or the range of answers on multiple-choice questions, might be piloted.
(van Teijlingen and Huntley, 2001:2)

The pilot study site - a MAT within a neighbouring LA - with two new schools transitioning, was chosen solely on access and convenience grounds (Yin, 1989:80). There were differences, however, to the main study as the transitioning schools were already academies and only one was a primary. However, as I was not intending to use the data within the main results, there was no risk of cross-contamination. In fact, the pilot studies provided an invaluable opportunity to refine questions, wording, syntax and grammar, whilst also identifying gaps in what was asked and supplementary questions that might be useful.

Issues that were observed during the pilots of the questionnaires included:

- Comprehending the instructions in the covering letter;
- Understanding the questionnaire items, the terminology used, the sequence of questions and the flow of statements;
- Culturally specific terminology;
- The usefulness, or otherwise, of asking questions where answers were ranked in order of importance;
- Questionnaire format, including font and layout;
- Length of the questionnaire and time taken to complete it;
- Whether a separate questionnaire was needed for Governors and Senior Leaders.

To give some specific examples:

On my second pilot questionnaire, my opening question was, 'Were your initial concerns, if any, about joining a MAT alleviated during the conversion process?' A box was then left for comment. However, I found that three respondents in the pilot study simply answered 'yes.' As a result, I changed this to a structure whereby respondents had to list any concerns they might have first and then tick 'yes' or 'no.' This resulted in greater detail and depth to the answers. Several questions asked respondents to indicate a 'top 3' or 'top 5' in order of preference. However, in many instances, the indication of a preference meant no comment was made. For example, in one instance, I was presented with an answer saying that the scheme of delegation, timeline and development plan were the three most useful documents but with no further explanation. As a result, on several questions, I moved away from a ranking system that rationed information, to one with a tick system that offered an opportunity for comment.

A question in the pilot questionnaire also asked, 'Was there any information that you received that needed further clarification or explanation?' A range of documentation was then listed. However, when looking at the pilot responses, it became clear that several respondents had misinterpreted the question and simply ranked documents in order of opacity. This question was,

therefore, re-written in a grid format, enabling respondents to tick whether they had received the paperwork and then rate it 'unclear', 'reasonably clear' or 'very clear'. Initially I asked, 'At any time during the conversion process did you feel that the school should withdraw from the process?' One respondent wrote in the comment box, 'it would be a brave governor that said yes.' This made me realise that the question was too direct and leading. I, therefore, reworked it to ask more generally about experiences during the conversion process. I realised the importance of the 'partly' option during the administration of the pilot questionnaire, as it offered respondents the opportunity to nuance their answers and provide further clarification. Another important lesson was to restrict the number of 'contingency' questions, whereby the earlier question acts as a filter for a later one. In practice, these questions confused some respondents who appeared unsure how to proceed through the questionnaire sequence. As a result, some questions were left unanswered.

Whilst undertaking the pilot, I realised that it was unnecessary to have two different questionnaires for Governors and Senior Leaders. Issues were predominantly the same and the 'free text' and 'comments' sections offered opportunities for an individualised response. As a result, I moved to one questionnaire for the main study, which also made the interpretation and analysis of the data more straightforward.

In practice, the pilot interview schedule seemed to work successfully. I conducted six interviews: three Governors and three Senior Leaders, selecting those in leadership positions with prior knowledge and familiarity of the academies' programme. There were 12 questions in total and the interviews lasted for approximately 40 minutes, which seemed an appropriate length of time. The questions were chosen to expand and illuminate those in the questionnaire, and to enable more depth and exploration of reasoning. The mixture of question styles: direct, indirect, follow-up, probing and specifying also enabled a wide range of information to be gathered across the different topic areas.

Early in the pilot, I found that some questions incorporated terminology that was not always easily understood, RSC being a good example, or assumed prior knowledge of the history of the academies' programme. These questions were later changed to make them more accessible for different audiences. I also found having 'stepped' questions and prompts helpful to guide the interview and obtain the information I needed. It was too easy at times to drift away from the schedule into a tangential discussion, these prompts enabling me to refocus. However, almost in contradiction to this observation, I found it equally important, at times, to be led by the respondent rather than by the interview guide. This ensured that potentially interesting discussion points were fully explored, a good example being one interviewee's insights into what 'autonomy' and 'independence' actually looked like on the ground.

The issue of ethical sensitivity was a valuable lesson from the pilot, in ensuring that interviewees appreciated the nature of the research, its purpose, and how information would be used. When seeking clarification from an interviewee, it was important to remain as neutral as possible. The pilot also showed the advantages and difficulties of interviewing people I knew. The former had a degree of familiarity - people being more willing to speak openly and honestly. However, at times, I found this familiarity meant I was unwittingly imposing meaning on responses. Interviewing people, with whom I had no previous connection meant that I brought to the interviews fewer pre-conceptions or biases; however, my senior position, in a different organisation, coupled with the interviewees' unfamiliarity with some of the subject matter, meant answers were more limited in their usefulness. Speaking to one participant afterwards, she felt it would have been helpful to have had an indication of the questions in advance in order to be better prepared. This was an interesting observation that I implemented in the main study.

Another issue that arose in the pilot was that of insider knowledge. I was conscious when conducting my first pilot interviews that I was bringing two

questions to a premature conclusion when my own preconceptions appeared to be confirmed. This can be seen from the transcript below:

***Int:** Are you concerned that joining a multi-academy trust could lead to a loss of autonomy at local school level?*

***Res:** Well not really. Well, I wasn't until you mentioned it. This has been presented to us as a devo-max model¹ so I'm assuming we'll have the same responsibilities as now. I cannot see why anything would change - the school is doing well.*

***Int:** So as far as you're concerned it will be business as usual?*

***Res:** Yes.*

On reflecting on this question-and-answer exchange in my journal, I realised the leading nature of it - expecting a problem so the respondent replied with one. It also focused their answer on one area only - loss of autonomy, potentially cutting off other useful responses. My response, 'So as far as you're concerned....' answered for them and brought the question to an abrupt close with the word 'yes'.

As a result, I approached it differently in the main study:

***Int:** Do you have any concerns about joining a multi-academy trust and, if so, could you explain to me what they are?*

***Res:** Well it's difficult to know exactly at the moment. I suppose there is a concern regarding where decision-making will sit - with the Board of Directors or the Local Governing Body? That needs clarity. I am also concerned about how the finances will operate. The devo-max model suggests things will stay the*

¹ The 'devo-max' or maximum devolution model enshrined in the Scheme of Delegation ensured maximum devolution of powers from the BoD to LGBs.

same as the school is doing well but what's the point of changing if things don't alter on the ground.

Int: *You talk about clarity. How would that look?*

Res: *Well clear terms of reference for the Board and Local Governors agreed by both parties. A scheme of delegation that reflects the devo-max model and protects the interests of the school. Policies where it is clear where discretion and decision-making lie.*

As the above exchange shows, the more open-ended nature of the question enabled the respondent to expand in greater detail on their concerns whilst imparting some useful ideas in terms of developing the MAT. By asking the respondent, 'How would that look?' rather than 'So far as you're concerned', not only were the tensions inherent in the proposed 'devo-max' model drawn out, but a range of possible solutions identified.

3.14 Data Validation

Christie et al. (2000) suggest five ways of ensuring rigour and validity in case study research: construct validity, confirmability, internal validity / credibility, external validity / transferability, and reliability / dependability. The next section explains how each of these five areas were applied to this research project.

3.14.1 Construct Validity

Construct validity provides adequate operational measures for the concepts under investigation (Emory and Cooper, 1991; McDaniel and Gates, 1991), with Sekaran (1992:173) describing it as testifying, '...to how well the results obtained from the use of the measure fit the theories around which the test is designed.' This project achieved its construct validity by developing the research questions through a detailed literature review, by using multiple forms of evidence, and by having an expert peer-reviewer evaluate the evidence base. Triangulation allows for a stronger underpinning of research

methodology to assist with the generalisability of research findings (Denzin, 1978; Jorgensen, 1989; Patton, 1990), whilst also allowing multiple perspectives to be gathered on an issue. The subjectivity of the case study methodology was addressed through a structured questionnaire and interview process and a clearly delineated system for recording, transcribing and interpreting the evidence (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Dick, 1990).

In this project, apart from the Headteachers and Chairs of Governors, interviewees were selected in a random, anonymised manner. This made numbers manageable, whilst also ensuring a range of 'voices' were heard. The interview process was structured to reflect the key research questions and to develop any further areas of interest that emerged from the questionnaires. In this way it supplemented, rather than repeated, previously examined areas, allowing responses to be explored in greater detail. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with interpretations coded back to the literature review and research questions. As a result, the chain of evidence flowed from the drafting of the research questions, through data collection and analysis and onwards to the emergent conclusions.

3.14.2 Confirmability

Confirmability is the ability of others to satisfy themselves that the research was carried out in the way described (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1994). In this study, a record was kept of all evidence collected, including the recording of interviews, transcription and original notes. This audit trail would allow an external observer to trace the development of evidence, and progression of thinking, from the initial research questions through to the conclusions. External validation was also supported by regular examination of draft case study reports, and developing findings, by my supervisor.

3.14.3 Internal Validity

Case study research aims to locate generative mechanisms that assist in determining chains of evidence and hypotheses about real-life experiences (Merriam, 1988; Tsoukas, 1989; Sykes, 1990). In this research project, internal validity/credibility was established by using three strategies: cross-case analysis, pattern matching and expert peer-review. Cross-case analysis is explained by Khan and VanWynsberghe (2008:1) as, 'a research method that can mobilise knowledge from individual case studies... mobilisation of case knowledge occurs when researchers accumulate case knowledge, compare and contrast cases, and, in doing so, produce new knowledge.' In this study, this was achieved by comparing emergent findings with existing case studies of MATs to identify points of similarity and difference.

Pattern matching is described by Johnson and Christensen (2017:287) as a strategy, '...to make several predictions at once; then, if all the predictions occur as predicted (i.e. if the pattern is found), you have evidence supporting your explanation.' In this research project, pattern matching was used to compare interview transcripts from respondents working in maintained, foundation and academy schools: looking for areas of commonality and divergence. It was also used to compare questionnaire responses from the Chairs of Governors and Headteachers, and to identify emergent themes and ideas that could be cross-referenced back to the literature and Conceptual Framework.

Pattern matching does have its limitations, however. As Trochim (2006:2) points out, 'It is important to demonstrate that there are no plausible alternative theories that account for the observed pattern and this task is made much easier when the theoretical pattern of interest is a unique one.' This is a difficult task in a qualitative study. For example, when asking respondents about the motivations behind becoming an academy, and joining a MAT, greater independence and autonomy featured in most answers. It was relatively easy to 'pattern match' across maintained/academy/foundation

status and then compare back to the Conceptual Framework where autonomy and accountability were key themes. However, on further exploration, it turned out that different respondents had very different ideas of what 'autonomy' and 'independence' actually meant, meaning that pattern matching would have been neat but erroneous. For this reason, pattern matching was only one of several strategies used in this research project to support internal validity.

3.14.4 Expert Peer-Review

Peer review has been defined, 'as a process where a person reads, checks and gives their opinion about a piece of work that was written by another subject or expert working in their same subject areas' (McNair et al., 2019:1). In the same article, McNair et al. (2019:1) outline the benefits of peer review as: supporting the reliability of a scientific field, acting as a filter for work of insufficient quality and opening up channels of communication between authors. According to Krefting (1991) and Bitsch (2005), peer review helps the researcher to be honest with respect to his/her study, whilst contributing to a deeper reflexive analysis. I approached a retired university lecturer, who provided feedback on the data collection instruments, observed pilot interviews, checked my transcript coding, and followed the audit trail from data collection to analysis. Owing to the ethical concerns around my status as an insider researcher, and with a need to ensure my interpretations of data were not influenced by insider knowledge, the peer-reviewer used the questions identified by Rooney (2005), to check the validity of my internal processes:

1. *Do the researcher's relationships with subjects have a negative impact on the subject's behaviour so that they behave in a way that they would not normally?*
 2. *Did the researcher's prior, tacit knowledge distort results by leading to misinterpretations or false assumptions?*
 3. *Did hidden politics, loyalties, and other agendas lead the researcher to misrepresent or disregard important data?*
- (Adapted from Rooney, 2005:6)*

Specifically, they reviewed the pilot questionnaires, pilot interviews and interview questions. This was particularly useful as the reviewer could comment on my questions, interview technique, body language and interpretations. This enabled useful changes to be made for the main study, including the decision not to have separate questionnaires for Governors and Senior Leaders. When the data collection process was complete, the peer-reviewer also checked a random selection of anonymised transcripts to ensure they were coded consistently and that the conclusions drawn were logical and linked back to the conceptual framework and literature. An audit trail, described by Bowen (2009:307), as offering, ‘...visible evidence - from process and product - that the researcher did not simply find what she or he set out to find’, enabled me to account for my research activities and decisions, and show how data was collected, recorded and analysed. Interview transcripts, observational notes, and records were also cross-checked at three different stages. Lastly, I engaged in discussion of the results and conclusions with my supervisor, (Riege, 2003), whilst making explicit my insider-researcher position and theoretical orientation. Whilst peer review is frequently criticized on the grounds that it protects established opinions and is closed to genuinely new ideas, in this study it was a particularly useful tool to both challenge and confirm my thinking and to support the trustworthiness of the findings.

3.14.5 External Validity/Transferability

External validity, or transferability, refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated beyond the individual case study and the degree of generalisability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1989). Multiple case studies can be used to develop analytic generalisation through replication logic and/or corroboration of findings to support external validity (Yin, 1994). According to Li (2004:305), ‘to enable judgments about how well the research context fits with other contexts, thick descriptive data, i.e. a rich and extensive set of details concerning methodology and context, should be included in the research report’, whilst Shenton (2004:69) concludes, ‘without this insight, [thick description] it is

difficult for the reader of the final account to determine the extent to which the overall findings “ring true”. Although ‘thick description’ was collected during this research project, and specific strategies employed to enhance generalisability, my unique insider-researcher position obviously made replication difficult. Therefore, whilst Lincoln and Guba (1985:86) claim that thick descriptive data allows, ‘comparison of this context to other possible contexts to which transfer might be contemplated’, in this instance transferability could not be guaranteed.

3.14.6 Reliability/Dependability

Related to the above, the test for reliability/dependability involves other researchers being able to replicate the same study with similar results (Cassell and Symon, 1994; Miles and Huberman, 1994). As data in qualitative research involves different researchers utilising different methods at different times, data sets do not necessarily come together into a confirming picture (Neuman, 2014). To achieve reliability/dependability, a documentation trail was provided which included a case study protocol of data collection (Merriam, 1988; Eisenhardt, 1989). In this research project, a clear protocol was followed for the administration of the questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews, alongside the analysis of the findings - the majority of questions allowing for cross-referencing of answers between the different school types and participants. Through the online record keeping of SurveyMonkey and Excel, and the recording and transcription of interviews, a case study database was also established. For Yin (1994), the formation of such a database allows other researchers to access files and verify conclusions reached, although in my case this would have contravened assurances I gave about confidentiality. However, as already stated, it is impossible to totally replicate conditions, nuances and style, particularly of interview data, and so verification can never be precise.

To further support reliability, a reflective journal was also kept, ‘...in order to reflect on, tentatively interpret, and plan data collection’ (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989: para.77). This included personal reflections at different stages of

the research process, alongside areas that might be useful for future study. The reflective journal was particularly useful as there were gaps of up to 12 months between different data collection points and it was very easy to forget lessons learned, methodological tips and any problems and concerns that arose. By re-reading the journal before each new set of questionnaires and interviews, pitfalls were avoided, and lessons applied to improve the quality of evidence collected. (Journal entry examples can be found in Appendix G).

3.15 Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of examining and categorizing data to enable it to be converted into information useful for decision-making and to address the original propositions of the study. As there were three stages of data collection for this research project, analysis began after the first phase in October 2016 – the ongoing organization and examination enabling data collection strategies to be modified (the coding for the interviews was refined at each stage) - whilst allowing for the development of the ‘thick description’ identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

This was then developed further using the analysis strategy suggested by Silverman (2000):

- 1. Focus on data which are of high quality and easiest to collect;*
 - 2. Focus on one process within those data;*
 - 3. Narrow down to one part of that process;*
 - 4. Compare different subsamples of the population using the comparative method;*
 - 5. Generate topics with a scope outside the substantive area of the research.*
- (Silverman, 2000:152)

Through discussion with my supervisor, a plan was then produced to guide the analysis phase of this study. This is represented below:

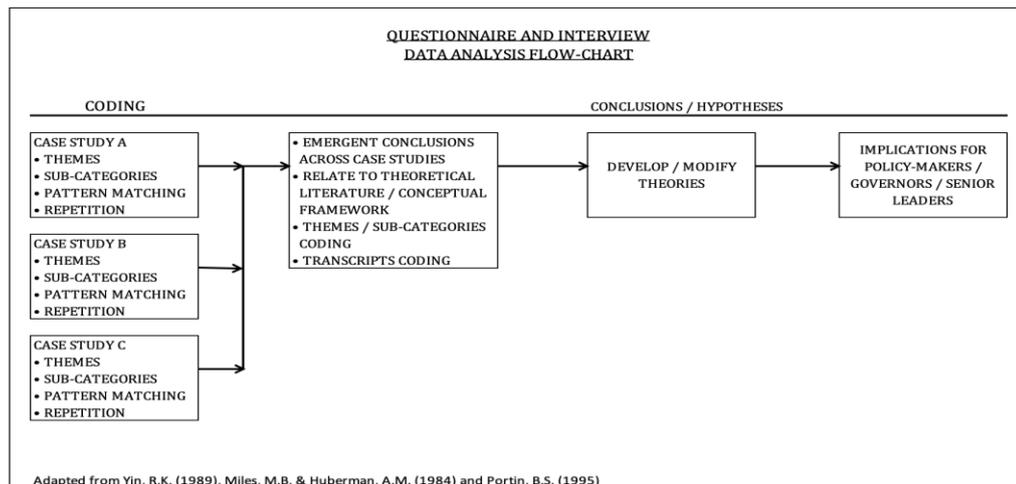


Figure 2 Data analysis flow-chart

3.15.1 Questionnaire Data

For the three sets of questionnaires, a coding system was developed. Each of the questions were coded and related back to the list of themes. However, as some questions incorporated a ‘top 3’ or ‘top 5’ ranking system, or a ‘very clear’ / ‘reasonably clear’ / ‘unclear’ categorisation, an element of quantification was also possible. This was achieved through transferring the numbers for the three different schools into an Excel spreadsheet to enable calculations and manipulation of the data. Respondents indicated their preferences which were then entered into the database and coded with a ‘G’ for Governor or ‘SL’ for Senior Leader. These were then cross-referenced, enabling patterns to be identified. Similarly, within SurveyMonkey, the ‘ticks’ against individual entries could be collated, and compared, so it was possible to obtain a generic summary of findings, differentiated by Governors/Senior Leaders or by school. For the comments section, quantification was obviously not possible. However, coding was applied to individual comments, and related back to the list of themes and sub-categories. Statements of particular interest were then placed into a Word file for ease of retrieval. One advantage of the ‘comments’ section was that it drew out areas that had not previously been considered or did not relate to the thematic base. As a result, these were then explored further during the interviews.

3.15.2 Interview Data

The interview data, in the form of transcripts, was handled differently for the Chair of Governors and Headteachers. As key data sources, these interviews were transcribed and checked with each individual and an individual summary sheet prepared. For other Governors and Senior Leaders, an anonymised group summary sheet of key findings was created. The volume of interview data necessitated the development of a method of coding and analysis with the handling of this data informed through the four-stage process outlined below:

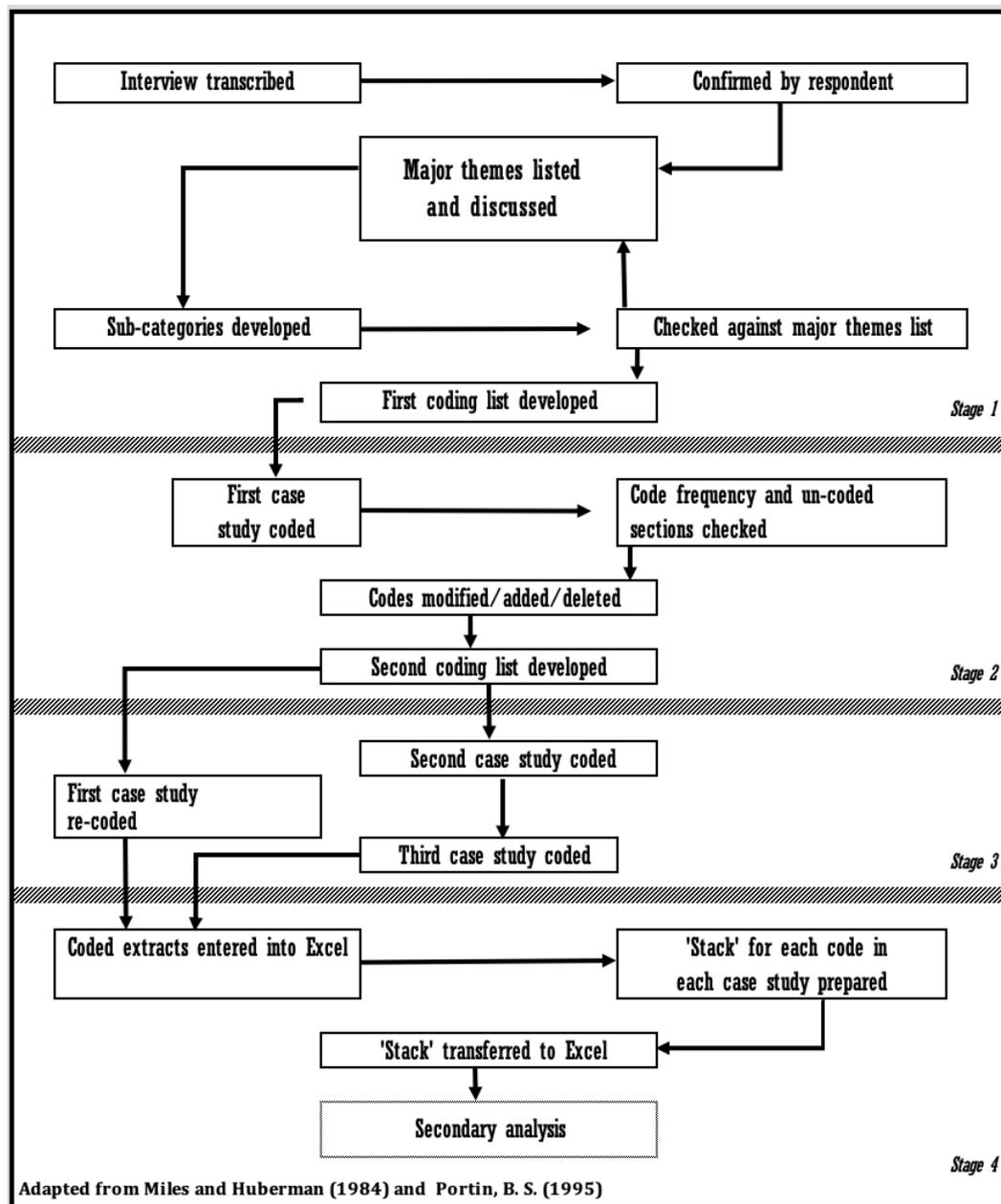


Figure 3 Method for coding transcripts for secondary analysis

All transcribed interviews were confirmed by respondents as accurate representations. Only one respondent wanted a comment which could have been construed negatively towards another member of staff removed. From the transcripts, a list of key themes and major categories and subcategories was developed. A coding list was then created and compared with the questionnaire responses to ensure nothing was missed. To give an example, independence might emerge as a theme from the interviews. I would then see whether there were any sub-categories within this, such as 'performance management constraints', which could be labelled separately. These codes were then entered into Excel with repetitive ones deleted. (A copy of a transcribed and coded interview is available in Appendix H). The reflective journal was then similarly coded and entered into the database, allowing information to be manipulated by group/school type and category of respondent.

3.16 Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological considerations that informed this research project. Central to this has been a description of, and justification for, the qualitative approach used, and how this relates to the research questions to produce the 'thick description' that Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify. The choice of Case Study as method, and its applicability to this research project, alongside issues of generalizability, relatability and validity have been discussed. Issues specific to context - insider research and power - have also been explored, alongside ethical considerations and the methods adopted to mitigate against bias and to enhance impartiality. The justification for the research instruments selected, alongside a discussion of the benefits and limitations of each, has been explained in-depth, with an analysis of the appropriacy of both questionnaires and interviews as data collection tools. Changes made to the research instruments as a result of the pilot have also been outlined, with the lessons learnt from the trialling process explained. By utilising the five strategies, outlined by Christie et al.

(2000), to ensure rigour and validity in case study research, reliability and dependability have been further enhanced.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an overview of the case study schools and the MAT. It then goes on to explore each of the research questions through a presentation of the evidence obtained from the questionnaires and interviews at the three different stages of the data-collection process. These findings are then sub-divided by Governors and Senior Leaders, and type of school, as appropriate. Following the presentation of evidence for each research question, there is an analysis section where the significance of the findings is explored and common patterns identified across each of the case study schools.

4.2 An Overview of the Case Study Schools

All three schools serve the western flank of a growing city of six hundred thousand people in southern England. The City has a demographic that reflects the national average, although there is a slightly higher population under the age of 18 than is found nationally. All schools serve areas of private and socially-owned housing with the numbers of disadvantaged pupils broadly reflecting the country as a whole.

Case Study School A - Academy Converter

School A is a mixed 11-18 secondary school of 2200 pupils. According to its website, it prides itself on high standards of academic achievement and excellent behaviour, welfare and support. School A has exam performance slightly above the national average, both for Attainment 8 and Progress 8, with post-16 value added broadly average. The last Ofsted report graded the school as 'outstanding' in all areas with leadership, management and governance singled out for particular praise. Attainment on entry is slightly above the national average. School A was a local authority maintained school for three years before adopting Foundation status and then becoming an

Academy Converter under the Academies Act (2010). The Headteacher has been in post for two years. The school is significantly oversubscribed.

Case Study School B - Local Authority Maintained

School B is a mixed 3-11 primary school of 360 pupils. It has year groups from Reception to Year 6. According to its website, its focus is on preparing pupils for life in modern Britain and encouraging caring, respectful and tolerant behaviour. An emphasis is placed on learning that is both engaging and stimulating, sparking creativity and imagination. School B has exam performance above the national average for Phonics, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, with progress being stronger than attainment. The last Ofsted report graded the school as 'good' overall with an 'outstanding' grade in two areas. School B has been a local authority maintained school since its inception. The Headteacher has been in post for three years. The school is oversubscribed.

Case Study School C - Foundation

School C is a mixed 2-11 primary school of 450 pupils. It has year groups from Nursery to Year 6. According to its website, its focus is on achieving outstanding academic outcomes through the highest quality teaching and learning. This is supplemented by an extensive array of art, music and drama provision. School C has exam performance placing it in the top 5% of schools nationally for both attainment and progress. It also performs equally strongly with disadvantaged and more able pupils. The last Ofsted report graded the school as 'outstanding' in all areas with no recommendations for improvement. School C was a local authority maintained school for seven years before adopting Foundation status. The Headteacher has been in post for four years. The school is significantly oversubscribed.

The Multi-Academy Trust

Discussions around forming a MAT started in January 2016. The decision to formalise arrangements and proceed was made by all three Governing Bodies in September 2016, the 12-month conversion process then beginning.

Transition into the MAT took place simultaneously for all three schools on September 1st, 2017 with the final data collection for this research project taking place in September and October 2018.

4.3 Motivations and Drivers Throughout the MAT Journey

4.3.1 Findings

School A - Academy Converter

The 12 Governors and 6 Senior Leaders of School A were sent questionnaire

1. Twelve responses were received from Governors and six from Senior Leaders. The results are displayed in Table 4.1 below:

Table 4.1 What are the motivations and drivers for Governors and Senior Leaders in a school looking to join a multi-academy trust?

School A	Governors (12)	Senior Leaders (6)
Key Drivers	(1) Increased funding (2) Greater autonomy (3) Government policy	(1) Increased funding (2) Raising educational standards (3) Greater autonomy
Comments	<p>'Funding is being cut nationally. This is a good opportunity to obtain additional money on a recurrent basis.'</p> <p>'The government always invests in its pet projects. We've always been in at the start of every initiative because that is where the funding is. Take it whilst it's there.'</p> <p>'Autonomy is the key to improvement. Moving away from the local educational authority can only raise standards. If there's money attached, even better.'</p>	<p>'Academies are the only game in town. We know how Conservative governments view LAs. MATs are a natural evolution of the educational landscape.'</p> <p>'This is a government that believes in the power of the market. For them it's academies and MATs and that's it. Do I believe that they raise standards? Not necessarily. But I don't believe in the alternative models much either.'</p> <p>'The more we can do ourselves without outside interference, the better it will be for pupils.'</p>

Question 2, from the first set of interviews, explored these topics in more depth asking, 'What are your main motivations behind thinking of becoming an academy/joining a multi-academy trust?' One Governor said each change in structure had caused them to, 'look again at where we are and what we

stand for’ whilst another said, ‘With several institutions, you can do so much more in terms of economies of scale and bringing people together. That’s got to be good for pupils.’

‘Greater autonomy’ and ‘increased funding’ were mentioned as key motivators by all of the Governors interviewed. The Chair of Governors, however, also referenced, ‘Creating an educational family of like-minded professionals who can share resources and professional development and see career development outside of their own school.’ The Headteacher of School A echoed these comments, ‘The trouble with local authorities is that you aren’t allowed to lead and manage. I once had 12 different people advising me. That took up a lot of my time for very little benefit. Now I can just ignore them.’

Governors and Senior Leaders from School A were asked whether they felt the academies’ policy was evolutionary or revolutionary. Interestingly, in both the first and the third set of interviews, all stated that it was ‘evolutionary.’ Reasons cited included: ‘It’s just a further development from what we could do as a Foundation school’; ‘There isn’t much else we can do that we couldn’t before’; and ‘We’ve got a little more freedom from the local authority but nothing significant.’

Questions 2 and 3, on questionnaire 1, explored the thoughts and perceptions of Governors/Senior Leaders as to the government’s main reasons for promoting academies and MATs and whether other forms of school organisation had been considered. Of the seven options presented, the 12 Governors selected ‘Sidelineing of local authorities’, ‘Allowing teachers and school leaders to be in control’ and ‘Breaking up national pay and conditions’ as their top 3 preferences. Not one Governor from School A saw the main purpose behind the academies’ programme as, ‘Improving outcomes for pupils.’ The six Senior Leaders canvassed chose the same three preferences but in a different order with ‘Breaking up national pay and conditions’ as their number one, followed by ‘sidelineing of local authorities’ and ‘allowing

teachers and school leaders to be in control.’ Once again neither ‘Improving outcomes for pupils’ nor ‘Increasing choice and diversity for parents’ featured.

During the first phase of interviews, one governor commented, ‘It would be naïve to believe this is about raising standards. Where’s the proof? This is about taking local authorities out of the education equation.’ Another governor opined, ‘In my view, the purpose of the programme is to put school leaders in the driving seat allowing them to make decisions. It is about empowering those on the ground and disempowering those behind a desk. That’s fine by me.’ When questioned about who those people ‘behind a desk’ were, he said ‘anyone who doesn’t teach.’ The Chair of Governors’ response was more measured but, nonetheless, political:

This is about sidelining local authorities and recreating the same structures through private organisations like MATs. I was a governor when schools became GM in the 1980s. This is just the same albeit on a slightly larger scale. It’s just a repeat of the past.

For the Headteacher of School A, the government’s motivation was to create a two-tier system, ‘A group of schools (academies) will have the money and resources, will be able to attract the best staff and control their admissions. The strong will survive and the weak go to the wall. But that has always been Tory policy.’

The question asking, ‘Did you consider these other forms of school organisation and, if so, why did you decide against them?’ gave four options. Of the 12 Governors who responded, the only box ticked was ‘umbrella trust.’ This was referenced by all 12, probably because the school had been part of an ‘umbrella trust’ at one stage. The Chair of Governors said she had considered the Federation model but decided, ‘It’s a non-starter really. There is no political impetus around it and, therefore, no money. I’m aware that in terms of improving educational outcomes there have been many success stories but you can’t even access the £25,000.00 conversion grant.’ When asked whether she had explored these different models with other Governors

she said, 'I didn't really see the point. There was enough to do.' Two of the Senior Leaders also expressed reservations over a 'soft' structure, seeing it as unsustainable. Neither was clear about what a 'Federation' actually was, nor how one operated.

In the second set of interviews, just prior to conversion into the MAT, the question was asked whether or not the key drivers to becoming an academy (if applicable) and joining a MAT had changed. Both Governors and Senior Leaders responded that 'increased funding' had become even more of a necessity. Reservations were expressed by one Governor and one Senior Leader, however, as to whether there would be any financial savings in reality, 'I'm not sure we are going to get any extra savings. We already get the LACSEG money. We might be able to make some savings as a MAT but they will take time to kick in' (Governor, School A).

The third questionnaire, issued 12 months after conversion, asked, 'Have your key motivations/drivers for wanting to become a MAT now been realised?' Of the 12 responses, nine indicated 'yes' in terms of 'freedom from the local authority' and 'greater collaboration' whilst eight were positive in terms of 'raised educational standards.' In terms of 'greater autonomy', only three replied in the affirmative and, with reference to the question about 'increased funding', only two. For Senior Leaders a similar pattern emerged, with a positive response to, 'greater collaboration', 'freedom from the local authority' and 'raised educational standards' but a negative one to 'increased funding' and 'greater autonomy.' During the third round of interviews, the Chair of Governors observed, 'The MAT has helped us in terms of working together but I feel we have lost some autonomy. It reminds me of the old local authority structure, to be honest.' The Headteacher similarly commented, 'I think I had more autonomy as Head of a standalone school. I didn't realise there would be so much oversight from the Board. This isn't how I imagined it.' The greater scrutiny experienced as part of a MAT, as opposed to that of a standalone institution, was a common response from those interviewed. The issue of funding was also a concern. As one Headteacher said, 'It's still early

days. I've really enjoyed the collaboration and working across phases to raise standards. I'm less comfortable with the reduction in autonomy and, the 'top slice.'

School B - Local Authority Maintained

The 9 Governors and 3 Senior Leaders of School B were sent questionnaire 1. Nine responses were received from Governors and three from Senior Leaders. These are detailed in Table 4.2 below:

Table 4.2 What are the motivations and drivers for Governors and Senior Leaders in a school looking to join a multi-academy trust?

School B	Governors (9)	Senior Leaders (3)
Key Drivers	(1) Increased funding (2) Greater autonomy (3) Raising educational standards	(1) Increased funding (2) Raising educational standards (3) Greater autonomy
Comments	<p>‘For me this is all about raising our performance even further. I’m only considering this because I believe, with the strength of the MAT, we can offer much greater opportunities for all pupils.’</p> <p>‘To be honest it’s mainly about money. Our staffing costs are way too high. Something has to give.’</p> <p>‘This is an opportunity to be prioritised on the admissions’ criteria and have greater autonomy. This was promised in earlier discussions.’</p>	<p>‘All funding will be consolidated in the MAT. We know some schools have large surpluses. These can support us if necessary.’</p> <p>‘Opportunities for shared professional development on teacher training and recruitment are a key motivation. This chance may not come around again.’</p> <p>‘It’s about sharing and developing resources, opportunities for career development and better prospects for promotion.’</p> <p>‘To be honest, I am also tired of the local authority placing any child they want into this school without us getting a say. It’s ridiculous.’</p>

In terms of whether the academies’ policy was ‘evolutionary’ or ‘revolutionary’, there was a marked difference between the first and third set of interviews. Whereas Governors and Senior Leaders had initially felt the policy was ‘revolutionary’, twelve months after the MAT formation, responses

were more measured, 'We haven't been able to change that much to be honest. There is less flexibility than I thought. We seem to be tied into the same structures' and, 'I thought we'd have been more innovative than we have been. Not sure we've used our freedoms really.' What was not explained in these responses was whether this was an issue with the academies' programme per se, or the respondents' approach to it.

Questions 3 and 4 explored the government's motivations for promoting academies and MATs, and highlighted some key differences in opinion between Governors. Of the seven options presented, the nine Governors chose: 'sidelining local authorities'; 'breaking up national pay and conditions'; and 'allowing teachers and school leaders to be in control' as their top 3. There was no mention of 'Raising educational standards'. Interviewing the Chair of Governors, I pointed out the contradiction between her stated aim of educational improvement by becoming an academy, and joining a MAT, and her thoughts on government motivation. She responded:

We have always done well as a LA school. Our outcomes are in the top 5% nationally. Do I really believe this will make things better? Probably not. But if we don't do something, I think we will be left behind, and I would rather be with people I trust.

For Senior Leaders, the government's motivations were: 'sidelining local authorities'; and 'breaking up national pay and conditions' with 'Allowing teachers and school leaders to be in control' the third preference. For the Headteacher of School B, the academy/multi-academy model was not seen as particularly attractive, more as a necessary evil, 'The truth is I'm not wedded to one particular model. But with staffing costs running at almost 90% of budget this seems the only path to increasing our funding.' One governor was particularly critical of the discussions and approach towards forming a MAT:

The truth of the matter is no one is considering what is best for children or best for parents. Where is the educational discussion? Taking away the role of the LA in supporting the school will add to costs, not reduce them. Show me a cost/benefit analysis? It's like the old grant-maintained policy but less transparent. At least, parents got a vote in the past.

Similar to School A, there was limited knowledge and understanding of different school organisational models. Only one Governor said they had considered a different model - the 'informal, loose collaboration' but in the 'comments' box added, 'I felt this was unlikely to work as most collaborations start with good intentions but people leave/other priorities come in and momentum falters.' During her interview, the Chair of Governors said, 'There seemed little point in leading people down the cul-de-sac of different options. The MAT model is the only one with money attached.' Senior Leaders were also dismissive of alternative models, 'We don't need to do all this work just to arrive at a halfway house option. I don't know much about Federations, but I do know they retain LA involvement which is of no interest to me.'

The second set of interviews, conducted just before conversion into the MAT, raised concerns over funding. The Chair of Governors stated, 'I really hope the LACSEG monies are generous, as our staffing costs are still too high'; a concern echoed by the Headteacher. For another Governor, the motivation was to drive the next stage of the school's development, 'I'm excited by the future to be honest. I felt we've just been treading water, and this is a real opportunity to consider what we stand for as a school and to refresh our values.' When questioned whether this 'refresh' could have come through another form of school organisation, the response was interesting: 'Possibly, but this is the only option on the table at the moment. It's going to be revolutionary for us' whilst one of the Senior Leaders from School B expressed concern that, 'the MAT might just be another form of LA. I would have liked more clarity about how things are going to work operationally in the future.'

Twelve months on, a question during the third round of data collection asked whether the key motivations/drivers for wanting to become a MAT had been realised.' Seven Governors responded. All seven indicated 'yes' in terms of 'freedom from LA' and 'greater collaboration.' In terms of 'greater autonomy' only two replied in the affirmative and, with reference to the question about 'increased funding', none. For Senior Leaders there was a similar pattern - a positive response to, 'greater collaboration' and 'freedom from the LA' but a

negative response to 'Increased funding', 'greater autonomy' and 'raising educational standards.' Positive comments were expressed around working together and sharing ideas, whilst negativity was evident towards autonomy and deteriorating finances. This dissatisfaction surfaced in the third round of interviews with a Governor adding, 'We should have asked more questions. Financially, owing to the 'top slice', we have less money and less control than before. How did that happen?'

School C - Foundation

The 9 Governors and 3 Senior Leaders from School C were sent questionnaire 1. Six responses were received from Governors and three from Senior Leaders. The results are displayed in the table below:

Table 4.3 What are the motivations and drivers for Governors and Senior Leaders in a school looking to join a multi-academy trust?

School C	Governors (6)	Senior Leaders (3)
Key Drivers	(1) Increased funding (2) Greater autonomy (3) Raising educational standards	(1) Greater autonomy (2) Increased funding (3) Freedom from LA
Comments	<p>'Does autonomy raise standards? I have not seen any compelling evidence.'</p> <p>'Since we've been Foundation, we've supposedly had more autonomy. It hasn't helped us raise standards, however.'</p> <p>'In my opinion it's a bit of an illusion. Apart from some control over admissions, what has Foundation status given us? Hopefully, the MAT conversion will show more benefits.'</p> <p>'To me it is about raising educational standards but how do you do that unless funding is protected or increased?'</p>	<p>'A main driver was to work more closely with our secondary colleagues. This will, hopefully, aid transition and we should be able to learn from each other.'</p> <p>'With any new initiative there is funding and impetus. The MAT structure is encouraging at present. We need to get behind it to access new funding and to sponsor new schools.'</p> <p>'I'd like to get further away from the LA. Their service provision is poor.'</p> <p>'This is a real opportunity to bring schools together and invest in high-quality professional development.'</p>

In terms of whether the academies' policy was 'evolutionary' or 'revolutionary', responses were mixed. Three Senior Leaders felt it was 'revolutionary' in terms of its speed and success, as measured by rates of

conversion. Others, including Governors, felt it was more of a 'stepped change' from Foundation status.

Questions 2 and 3, on questionnaire 1, explored the thoughts and perceptions of Governors/Senior Leaders as to the government's encouragement of academies. Of the seven options presented, Governors chose 'allowing teachers and school leaders to be in control', sidelining of local authorities' and 'breaking up national pay and conditions'. The views of Senior Leaders were similar with their top 3 being: 'sidelining local authorities'; 'breaking up national pay and conditions'; and 'allowing teachers and school leaders to be in control.' One Senior Leader added in the 'comments' box, 'It's a bribery policy - they know schools need the money.' A similar view was expressed in one of the interviews, 'If you are faced with the decision, as many schools will be, as to whether you make people redundant or you become an academy and join a MAT, most schools will do the latter.' When questioned further, this Senior Leader said, 'It's about taking local authorities out of the educational equation and replacing them with private interests.' Interestingly, however, this same Senior Leader expressed no desire to return to a LA led system, 'That didn't work for us either. The LA kept interfering.' Reference to a two-tier system was also made by one Governor, 'What worries me is that we are creating a have-and-have-not system. There's only one pot of money and it seems to me unfair that it is distributed unevenly owing to where you stand politically.'

The question asking whether other forms of school organisation had been considered found all four options ticked by all six Governors. This was surprising given the lack of awareness expressed by the Governors in Schools A and B.

The Chair of Governors said:

When we decided to explore foundation status, we also considered other ways of doing things. Of particular interest were the different types of Federation. The main reason we didn't

take it further was we did not have anyone to federate with and, unlike a MAT, which can exist with only one school, this was not an option for us. We also did not want to have that degree of LA involvement.

A Senior Leader expressed a similar view, 'A federated structure lacks the certainty of the MAT model. Partnership working is too personality dependent. If key people leave, then it tends to drift. It's like living together with no intention of getting married.'

The second set of interviews found little change of opinion. A key driver was still collaboration and the opportunities for schools to work together without LA involvement. As one Senior Leader put it, 'During the conversion year, we've worked closer together than ever. There's a real structure to what we are doing with common planning, teaching and timetabling meetings. There's a momentum.' The Headteacher agreed:

Whatever my other reservations, in terms of professional development for staff, the MAT has created an impetus to share ideas, get involved in each others' classrooms and simply talk to each other. It's got to be good for the children.

The third questionnaire asked whether or not the original drivers and motivations for becoming an academy and joining the MAT had been realised. All six Governors responded positively in terms of 'freedom from the LA' and 'greater collaboration.' Similar to Schools A and B, there was less certainty around the other options. Only one Governor highlighted 'increased funding' and none of the Governors evidenced 'greater autonomy.' As the Chair of Governors put it, during the third phase of interviews, 'We were already an outstanding school, so everyone left us alone. It seems to me there is less autonomy as part of a MAT. I feel that a lot of things are being decided without consultation.' The Headteacher agreed but was less concerned, 'In many ways I've found it quite liberating. I can get on with the teaching and learning which is what really interests me.' The issue of 'increased funding', which was a central concern for Schools A and B, was also an issue for School C, with

governors expressing concern over the value of the centralised services in the MAT.

4.3.2 Analysis

'Obtaining greater autonomy' was a key motivation evident from the first two data collection points. However, by the time the MAT had been operational for 12 months, problems had emerged and there was a lack of clarity over how autonomy should look post-conversion. Respondents from School B, previously LA maintained, felt they had less autonomy than previously, owing to the governance and centralising tendencies of the MAT. This was an unexpected finding. For many Ofsted rated 'good' schools, such as School B, dwindling LA resources had meant a 'hands off' approach for years, the incorporation into a MAT suddenly increasing the level of scrutiny. This explains a seeming contradiction in the data, whereby Governors and Senior Leaders from School B felt they had greater freedom from the LA but also less autonomy. For School A, which had been an early academy converter, the tension between the centre and the local was a particular concern - one respondent comparing the MAT to an LA.

Closely linked with the issue of autonomy is funding and who is accountable for spending priorities and decision making. The findings demonstrate the importance of 'increased funding' as a motivator for respondents from Schools A and C. Both schools had previously taken advantage of this by converting to Academy and Foundation status respectively, the MAT being seen as the next stage in their evolution. National reductions in funding meant new opportunities to obtain additional monies were a priority for both Governors and Senior Leaders. There was no particular affection for the MAT model, nor any particular belief in its efficacy, but for respondents from these schools, improved educational standards and increased funding were explicitly linked. The findings for School B show the differing priorities of 'greater autonomy' for Governors and 'increased funding' for Senior Leaders. This discrepancy possibly reflects the fact that, as a previously maintained school, Governors had less oversight and knowledge of financial matters,

although arguably they had the most to gain financially through conversion into an academy and MAT. What is particularly interesting is that, across all three schools, 12 months after the conversion, 'increased funding' was the biggest area of dissatisfaction. Little detailed financial planning had taken place at local level - Governors and Senior Leaders failing to understand how the LACSEG monies were calculated, the financial implications of the 'top slice' and who would decide where money was spent. That all three schools found themselves in a worst financial position than before the conversion was particularly ironic considering their original motivations. Common to all three schools was a concern over the central services provided by the MAT, their value-for-money and whether they offered an improvement on those previously provided by the LA.

Only three respondents actually referred to 'Greater collaboration' as a motivator during the first data collection point. However, by the time of the second round of questionnaires and interviews, working together, shared professional development, and opportunities to exchange best practice were seen as real benefits of the MAT structure. Twelve months after the MAT conversion, over 90% of respondents felt it was in this area of partnerships, with joint training and cross-phase working, where the MAT had been most successful. Whilst it is outside the scope of this research project to consider, it would have been interesting to explore whether this same outcome could have been achieved through a different organisational structure.

'Raising educational standards' was identified as a key priority for Schools B and C at the beginning of the conversion process but became less important during the transition phase. Evidence from the second round of interviews suggests that, as all three schools were consistently generating high academic outcomes, it was a lower priority to the more pressing issues of autonomy and funding. Given, however, that one of the central aims of the academies' programme is improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, it does appear incongruous that it hardly features. One explanation could be a limitation of the questionnaire design, whereby the 'top 3' and 'top 5' prioritising allows

for only a small number of responses. Similarly, it was apparent from the interviews that, whilst areas such as 'increased funding' and 'greater collaboration' were regarded as central to improving educational outcomes, they were not explicitly linked as such within the questionnaire design - another methodological limitation.

Autonomous control over admissions was an important motivator for respondents from Schools B and C. There were frequently cited concerns over challenging pupils being disproportionately placed into the case study schools. There was little evident moral or social concern for how the needs of such pupils would be addressed across an LA and within an academized system generally. This shows an unintended, (or possibly intended), consequence of the academies' programme - the very pupils it claims to support being those most likely to be negatively affected by its operation. The greater the number of academies and MATs within an area, the fewer maintained schools an LA can direct pupils to. As a result, these schools can become disproportionately overloaded causing them to underperform and, therefore, consider academy status to control their admissions. Furthermore, if they continue to underperform, and want to stay as LA maintained, they run the risk of being forcibly converted into a sponsored MAT anyway. The candour expressed in some of these comments regarding admissions was surprising, supporting my view that, despite my position of power, and work as an insider researcher, respondents were prepared to be honest and forthright.

There was a marked difference between the three schools as to whether they viewed the academies' policy as 'evolutionary' or 'revolutionary.' This was perhaps unsurprising. School A was already an academy so both Governors and Senior Leaders had evolved with the changes to the school system. Three had been Governors during the GM initiative of the 1980s and saw academies within this evolutionary context. Respondents from School B, prior to conversion, were most likely to view the policy as 'revolutionary', possibly because they had no prior experience of operating outside of the LA. Twelve

months on, however, and there was uncertainty over what difference, if any, academy status had made. This could have been due to the time taken to transfer systems into a new academy context, but also because, as a successful LA school, many academy initiatives were already available. Respondents seemed unclear at the beginning what changes they were expecting to see and then disappointed when they did not see them, a classic paradox. In School C, differences were expressed between Governors and Senior Leaders - with the speed of the academies' programme being seen as the main 'revolution' for the former - and enhanced autonomy for the latter. For many Governors, the journey had been from 'maintained' to 'foundation' to 'academy' and then 'multi-academy trust' - incremental, rather than giant steps.

Respondents across all three schools overwhelmingly saw the academies' programme as political rather than educational. Once again, interviewees were willing to express their views honestly and forthrightly. It was interesting that one experienced Governor saw the academies' programme as a rebranding of the GM initiative of the 1980s. For others, it was about creating a two-tier system where the strongest schools survived, and the weakest failed - a 'market'. In general, it was not believed that the academies' programme would raise standards, only three respondents citing evidence of a positive impact on outcomes. The twin drivers of increased funding and greater autonomy were initially seen positively, as was the potential to side-step the LA. After 12 months this had changed. There was a clear lack of support amongst Governors and Senior Leaders for a local-authority-led model, although, ironically, no belief that academization would be an improvement. Whilst this might have been expected in Schools A and C, that had moved away from local government control early, it was equally as evident in School B. The LA had been unable to sustain its previous level of service to schools owing to a lack of funding. As a result, schools became increasingly dissatisfied and converted to academy status, whereby the LA's resources became even more depleted, further increasing dissatisfaction.

In Schools A and B, there was little understanding of different school organisational models. Despite the enormity and irreversible nature of the decision to join a MAT, other options were not fully explored. Governors and Senior Leaders displayed a lack of appetite for exploring different structures, partly because of the continued involvement of the LA, and partly because of the belief that informal collaborations did not generate lasting partnerships. School C was different to Schools A and B in that Governors and Senior Leaders had previously explored a range of school structures. However, once again, there was a belief that looser collaborations were too personality-dependent to work long term.

4.4 Issues and Concerns at Different Stages

4.4.1 Findings

There was a remarkable consistency to the concerns and issues identified by Governors and Senior Leaders from all three schools at the start of the MAT process. As a result, and to avoid repetition, this section has not been subdivided by school. Of the six options presented, 'losing local control' and 'losing individual school identity' were the main concerns. Comments included, 'I am concerned that we might end up losing our uniqueness - a bit like a franchise' and 'I am worried we might get swallowed up into the world of corporate branding.' Senior Leaders also expressed disquiet: 'This school stands for something. You cannot drive aims and values from the centre. It needs to be a local thing' and 'People don't want to be run by a faceless monolith located miles away.' These issues were followed up during the first set of interviews. The Chair of Governors from School A pointed out, 'Of course, I don't want to lose what we are about. But as the biggest school in the proposed Trust, I think we should be able to shape things.' By contrast, the Chair of Governors of School B expressed unease, 'We are new to this. I just hope our local voice isn't lost in the mix. Our values have kept us together.' Concerns were expressed over common school uniforms, branding, curriculum, assessments and performance management, with one Governor warning of, 'the McDonalds approach where you might get consistency, but you lose individuality.'

The second concern involved losing autonomy and 'local control' For Governors from School B, previously LA maintained, this was a particular issue as nine free text boxes were completed. As one Governor wrote, 'I'm worried how the governance will shake down. What will our representation be? I don't want our Governing Body to disappear.' A Senior Leader said, 'There will obviously be a Board of Directors. What are these people going to do? What influence will they wield? Who determines what they control?' During the initial set of interviews, the Chair of Governors from School A observed, 'How we set this MAT up will be crucial to its success. These are all

highly effective schools. I just cannot see the transition into a MAT happening if the schools feel they will lose control.'

During the second data collection point, as the schools converted into the MAT, neither 'losing individual school identity' nor 'losing local control' featured in a single response. This was surprising given its prominence during the first round of data collection. When followed up during the interviews, comments included, 'The devo-max model has reassured me. The Governing Body will stay pretty much the same' (Governor, School B) and, 'I think the way it has been set up means schools will continue doing what they are already doing' (Governor, School C). These reassurances were reflected in the answers of the Senior Leaders, 'I'm relieved to be honest. I think everyone had the same issues and we've addressed them. I don't think there was any appetite for or need to change a successful formula (Headteacher, School A). One Governor from School B expressed caution, however, 'Things can change. What is there to stop the scheme of delegation being altered at a later date? I'm surprised there wasn't more questioning. If you are from a small school, you can be voted down each time.'

The final data collection stage saw autonomy and 'losing local control' re-emerging in importance for Governors and Senior Leaders across all three schools. One Governor from School B wrote, 'More and more work is being centralised. Whilst this might not be a bad thing, there is no control over it. It has taken on its own momentum.' Similarly, a Governor from School A observed, 'There is a lot less ownership at school level.' The Headteachers were more measured in their responses, although this could also have been a consequence of having someone from the 'centre' conducting the interviews. One said, 'I think what was missing from the process was a clear view of how the central function would work post-conversion. Once the transfer happened, the discussion ended.'

Respondents from Schools A and C expressed greater concern about the loss of autonomy and 'local control' than those from School B. As the Chair of

Governors explained, 'as a former LA school we are used to a degree of external oversight.' Eight Governors, across all three of the schools, expressed frustration that the 'devo-max' model promised during the conversion had not been implemented. Two representative comments were: 'I wasn't clear before of the control wielded by the BoD. The LGB just seems an advisory group now' and, 'The amount of direction and policy coming down from the Board means we are managers rather than leaders.' Concerns were also expressed by two Senior Leaders from School B over the concept of a local school serving a local community potentially disappearing.

Whilst 'losing individual school identity' did not re-emerge as a concern, the majority of Senior Leaders believing they would be left alone whilst things were going well, the 'top slice of funding' became a new issue. Despite being openly discussed prior to the conversion, comments in the 'free text' box included, 'I'm not sure exactly what services we get for our 5% contribution. I'd like to see a proper breakdown compared to what we used to spend' and, 'We have no real say over what the 5% is spent on. It's hundreds of thousands of pounds. There needs to be more transparency. A Governor from School A observed, 'Nobody worried about the 'top slice' when the LA did it because it was hidden. Now it's out in the open, everyone questions it. I'm not sure that's a good thing.' The Headteachers of all three schools also expressed concern over the amount of money involved and were frank in their interviews. This further supported the robustness of the methodology. Comments included, 'I receive a lot of effective support from the central team but I'm not sure it's worth the two Deputy Headteachers' salaries I pay in to support it' (Headteacher, School A) and 'This could lead to redundancies. Not centrally, of course, but in my school' (Headteacher, School C). When questioned as to why the implications had not been weighed up in advance, and factored into the decision making as to whether to form a MAT, the Headteacher of School C said, 'It was difficult to get the figures. I assumed we'd break even when we had the LACSEG monies refunded. That has not been the case.' For the Headteacher of School B, by contrast, the 5% 'top slice' represented better

value, 'I use the central team a lot. All the admissions, governance and HR work is done for me. It depends what you make of it.'

Twelve months after conversion, none of the respondents highlighted 'losing LA control' as an issue, despite the concerns expressed at the previous two data collection points. Interestingly, even respondents from School B, felt the same, 'The LA was so depleted by the end, it was struggling to offer any decent services' (Senior Leader, School B). One Senior Leader from School C placed things in a wider context, however, 'To me, it was never really about what the LA provided. It's the democratic mandate and the fact provision could be coordinated across a whole area. What might be best for us might not be best for someone else. Now everyone just fights their own corner. Someone must lose.'

A common issue, raised by five Senior Leaders and six Governors across the three schools in the final set of interviews, was the sustainability of school improvement. Whilst opportunities for partnership working and joint-professional development were seen as benefits of the MAT model, a recurrent concern was whether this could be sustained and, if so, what was needed to support this. As a Senior Leader from School B put it, 'I am not sure we really know what the building blocks of school improvement across the MAT look like. As effective as many initiatives are they are distinctly arbitrary', whilst the Headteacher of School C added, 'This is surely a unique opportunity to develop a school improvement strategy with a collective pedagogy stretching from Nursery to Post-16. Instead we seem to focus on mock Ofsted inspections - the tired concept of earned autonomy.' The Chair of Governors of School A, similarly, felt that an opportunity had been missed during the MAT transfer process to design, co-ordinate and take ownership of school improvement post-conversion, 'We focused too much on the mechanics - legal structures, funding agreements, TUPE - whilst missing the opportunity to look at pedagogy, practice and vision. When will we ever get that range of people and expertise around a table again?'

4.4.2 Analysis

'Losing individual school identity' was a key concern for all participants at the start of the MAT conversion process. As successful standalone schools, significant disquiet was expressed at the possibility of losing uniqueness and becoming part of a larger, more impersonal organisation, detached from its local context. This was a greater issue for the primary schools than the secondary, perhaps reflecting their closer relationship with parents and the local community. The idea of the MAT as a separate entity, distant and detached from its schools and community, was a common initial concern. By the second data collection point, however, these concerns had dissipated with respondents explaining that, owing to it being such a controversial issue, safeguards had been built into the conversion process. These included a 'devo-max' model, which all Governors and Senior Leaders welcomed, minimal changes to the makeup of existing Governing Bodies and committees, and a scheme of delegation that prioritised local decision-making. It was seen as important for respondents to be consulted about these discussions, and to have their concerns over corporate branding and a franchise model aired. This was a successful partnership strategy adopted by those leading the conversion process, as even 12 months after the MAT's formation, 'losing individual school identity' was not a recurrent issue.

Having non-negotiables identified from the outset was important to prevent the process stalling further down the line. Despite this, dissenting voices remained. Concern was expressed that the BoD could change the scheme of delegation at any time and that the weighted representation of the governance structure favoured the larger schools that could wield a veto. Both of these observations were accurate but, because this had not yet happened, were seen as isolated issues. One respondent also pointed out that it was only 12 months after the MAT's formation, and there was nothing to prevent changes coming later - a limitation of this study being that data collection stopped after one year of the MAT's operation.

Autonomy, and 'losing local control', by contrast, were issues at every stage of data collection. During initial conversations about the proposed MAT, concerns over governance and the influence of the BoD were seen as needing to be resolved, with the Headteachers, in particular, worried about losing control and authority. The fact that these issues did not re-emerge at the second data collection point shows how the scheme of delegation and reassurances offered effectively quelled any disquiet. These reassurances did not last long, however, as 12 months later, all respondents expressed dissatisfaction over a loss of autonomy. Interestingly, however, the concerns were not the same as those originally expressed. Whilst the increasing influence of the BoD was seen as problematic, especially as the LGBs across the schools felt downgraded in importance, the bigger concern surrounded the growing centralisation of services, the role of the central team, and the inability of schools to influence this. At no previous stage had this issue been raised. Whilst, during the transition process, scrutiny was rightly placed on governance structures, funding agreements and the scheme of delegation, little attention had been paid to the composition of the central team, the control it would exercise and its accountability. For Senior Leaders interacting with the central team on a daily basis, and seeing autonomy disappearing, this was a key concern. In many ways, this was a new partnership whose boundaries had not been clarified. Interestingly, two Senior Leaders referred to the Central Function as 'above us' creating an undoubted sense of being 'done to' by a team detached from its local environment. These accountability issues: who is responsible for what, and why, became increasingly contentious as the MAT developed, showing the importance of paying attention to future structures early on.

Twelve months after conversion, respondents did not identify the 'loss of LA support' as an issue. This could either reflect the success of the Central Function in replacing some of these services, or it could reflect the financial pressures on LAs meaning that services previously offered had already been significantly scaled back. For two Senior Leaders in School B, however, the LA was not just a provider of services. It was a democratic institution, which took

a county-wide view on provision, and ensured the best possible structures were in place to serve the needs of all children, especially the disadvantaged. Whilst this was a minority view of those canvassed, it raised interesting questions as to which institution would now protect the interests of all pupils in an area, MATs often being perceived to have their own agendas.

Control over the 'top slice' - its uses and accountability - was frequently commented upon during the third data collection point, this being the first time it was in operation. Even though respondents from all three schools were aware of the impact of the 5% deduction prior to conversion, concern was still expressed over the amount being deducted, what it was being spent on, and its impact. It was clear that accurate financial modelling had not been undertaken. With funding provided directly to each school, and the 'top slice' then deducted, it was easy for Governors and Senior Leaders to see what they were 'losing'. Once again this was an autonomy issue. For one Governor from School A this transparency was not seen positively, as it opened up too many questions, but other respondents felt it usefully enabled them to challenge and question. As a result, an annual report on the use, impact and value-for-money of the 'top slice' was ordered by the BoD with the flexibility to adjust the percentage deducted. As under the previous LA maintained system, GAG pooling meant schools were unaware what monies were deducted, and what they were being spent on, it could be argued that this openness was a good thing. However, as the two Senior Leaders from School B pointed out, whereas the LA could provide funding for specific projects and wider initiatives, MATs were unlikely to have much of an interest beyond their own borders. Partnerships, in their view, were now increasingly turning inwards.

A coherent strategy for school improvement across the MAT was seen as desirable across the case-study schools. There was a distinct feeling that school improvement across the MAT lacked a clear focus and strategy, with activities too isolated, piecemeal and lacking in sustainability. It was somewhat ironic that, when asked what strategies would drive improvement in their own institutions, respondents had a clear view of what was needed,

but, when scaled up to MAT level, there was uncertainty. There was a common desire to move away from 'personalities' and towards a culture of continuous, collaborative school improvement that was coordinated across the MAT. Unfortunately, no one could describe what building blocks needed to be in place for this to happen, nor what it should look like. This uncertainty was further evidence of the new partnerships and structures that were emerging between the MAT and its schools following the conversion.

4.5 Elements Supporting a Successful Conversion

4.5.1 Findings

There was a noticeable uniformity in the responses from Governors and Senior Leaders from all three case studies. As a result, the findings to this question are not subdivided by school type. Governors and Senior Leaders were asked, 'What elements support successful transition into a MAT?' with ten suggestions provided. The outcomes are detailed in Table 4.4 below:

Table 4.4 Those elements necessary for successful transition into a MAT

<i>where 1 is high and 5 is low</i>		Governors (School A)	Senior Leaders (School A)	Governors (School B)	Senior Leaders (School B)	Governors (School C)	Senior Leaders (School C)
Shared vision and aims of MAT	✓ / ✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Ranking (1 to 5)		1	5	1	4	
Detailed timeline and action plan	✓ / ✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Ranking (1 to 5)	1		1	4	1	5
Agreed 'non- negotiables' early	✓ / ✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Ranking (1 to 5)	2	4	2	3	2	4
Working Group that met regularly	✓ / ✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	
	Ranking (1 to 5)	4					
Draft documentation produced early for comment	✓ / ✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Ranking (1 to 5)	3		3	5		3
Support from other agencies	✓ / ✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
	Ranking (1 to 5)						
Effective communication and feedback during process	✓ / ✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Ranking (1 to 5)		3			5	2
Prior relationship and trust between parties	✓ / ✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	
	Ranking (1 to 5)		2		2		1
Clear 'stepping off' points	✓ / ✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Ranking (1 to 5)	5	5	4		3	

For Governors, having a detailed timeline and action plan was the single most important factor in aiding a smooth transition. As the Chair of Governors from School A pointed out, 'It is crucial to know where you are going, what decisions need to be made and when and what documentation needs to be entered into.' The Chair of Governors from School C agreed, adding, 'We only

have limited time. We need to know when we will be called upon and the implications of any decisions we need to make.' The regular revisiting, updating and sharing of this action plan was seen as fundamental to guiding conversion, 'It was both a torch and a touchstone' (Governor, School B). Closely allied to this was 'Agreeing non-negotiable early' and 'Having clear stepping-off points' which were in the 'Top 5 fundamentals' for all Governors. As one explained, 'Two things were vital to a successful transition - getting the difficult discussions out of the way early - and knowing the process could be stopped if, at any time, we were not on-board. Deal with the most contentious first.' All of the Governors agreed that having 'stopping off' points throughout the 12-month process was crucial to gaining trust and alleviating concerns, 'I always knew the conversion could be paused. That avoided the sense of a process just unfolding with no control' (Governor, School B).

Three Governors commented on the limited nature of the question itself, 'The truth is all the areas listed are crucial, especially communication and relationships. It is very difficult to prioritise one over another' (Governor, School A). This feeling was obviously shared by other Governors as only half of respondents actually completed the ranking - the majority of questionnaires simply having the 'yes' box ticked. In fact, the only areas that received 'no' answers were 'Support from other organisations' and 'Previous relationship between bodies' with one Governor adding, 'I'm not sure it was essential that we already knew each other. As long as the terms of reference are clear, it should work.' For Senior Leaders, however, having a 'Shared vision for the MAT', 'Prior relationship and trust' and 'Effective communication and feedback during process' were all within their 'Top 5' fundamentals. Documentation and paperwork were less important than the interpersonal and social dimensions of the process. As one Senior Leader pointed out, 'It was crucial to know who would be leading the conversion, could I trust them and what the strategy was for selling this to staff. It is one thing to have it on paper - somebody has to stand up in front of people.' For all Senior Leaders interviewed, managing the transition on the ground, taking

people with them and getting the communication and message right was crucial.

The importance of getting 'buy in' from stakeholders was particularly evident when changes were being contemplated as a result of academy conversion. Questionnaire 1 asked, 'What changes are you planning to make following conversion to an academy/transition into a multi-academy trust?' This question was then repeated at each subsequent data collection point. Initially, 'Changed staff pay structures' and 'Changed the performance management system for teachers' were priorities for 76% and 82% of Governors respectively. By the second data collection, this had fallen to 32% and 43% and, 12 months after conversion, was a priority for just 6% and then 0%. As the Chair of Governors of School C explained, 'I think we realised, as the process unfolded, that we needed to keep people on side. Suggesting we were going to change things that affected people's conditions of work would have made acceptance of the MAT much more difficult.' A Senior Leader from School B agreed, 'We [Senior Leaders] managed to convince the Governors that, if this was going to work, we needed to keep the status quo. Most of the radical early suggestions never materialised.' When questioned as to what these 'radical suggestions' were, 'changing the length and time of the school day' and 'altering catchment areas' were mentioned. This Senior Leader's viewpoint is confirmed by the results displayed in Tables 4.5 and 4.6 below. These tables are based on the research of Cirin (2014), which is reproduced in Table 5.0 on page 233, and considers how academies use their autonomy. Tables 4.5 and 4.6 show, at the three data collection points, the percentage of Governors and Senior Leaders, in this research project, *proposing* changes, alongside the percentage of changes actually *made*. When the percentage is less than 100%, this reflects the fact that Governors and Senior Leaders were drawn from all three schools where change had occurred.

Table 4.5 Governors: Proposed and Made changes

	Governors		
	Data collection Point 1	Data collection Point 2	Data collection Point 3
Procured services that were previously provided by the LA	90%	70%	80%
Changed the curriculum you offer	60%	20%	20%
Collaborated with other schools in more formalised partnerships	100%	100%	100%
Changed your pattern of capital expenditure	80%	30%	20%
Increased the numbers of pupils on roll	65%	45%	40%
Introduced savings in back office functions (such as HR, ICT etc.)	90%	70%	50%
Changed staff pay structures	76%	32%	6%
Reconstituted Governing Body	60%	100%	
Added non-teaching positions	40%	40%	40%
Changed the performance management system for teachers	82%	46%	12%
Introduced or increased revenue-generating activities	92%	62%	60%
Changed school leadership	0%	0%	0%
Changed your Admission Criteria	20%	15%	0%
Hired teachers without qualified teacher status (QTS)	10%	0%	0%
Sought to attract pupils from a different geographical area	0%	0%	0%
Increased the length of the school day	80%	40%	8%
Changed the length of the school terms	20%	10%	0%
Reduced the number of pupils on roll	0%	0%	0%

KEY
plan to change
made change

Table 4.6 Senior Leaders: Proposed and Made changes

	Senior Leaders		
	Data collection Point 1	Data collection Point 2	Data collection Point 3
Procured services that were previously provided by the LA	90%	80%	60%
Changed the curriculum you offer	30%	30%	10%
Collaborated with other schools in more formalised partnerships	100%	100%	
Changed your pattern of capital expenditure	80%	80%	60%
Increased the numbers of pupils on roll	82%	80%	60%
Introduced savings in back office functions (such as HR, ICT etc.)	60%	40%	40%
Changed staff pay structures	20%	10%	0%
Reconstituted Governing Body	90%	90%	90%
Added non-teaching positions	0%	0%	0%
Changed the performance management system for teachers	2%	0%	0%
Introduced or increased revenue-generating activities	0%	0%	0%
Changed school leadership	4%	2%	0%
Changed your Admission Criteria	20%	10%	10%
Hired teachers without qualified teacher status (QTS)	0%	0%	0%
Sought to attract pupils from a different geographical area	0%	0%	0%
Increased the length of the school day	0%	0%	0%
Changed the length of the school terms	0%	0%	0%
Reduced the number of pupils on roll	0%	0%	0%

KEY
plan to change
made change

As can be seen, the initial enthusiasm amongst Governors for the more contentious aspects of academization, (changing staff pay and conditions/lengths of days/terms/hiring unqualified teachers), became substantially diluted during and after the conversion process. For example, 'Increased the length of the school day' was prioritised by 80% of Governors

at data collection point 1, falling to 8% by data collection point 3. By contrast, Senior Leaders across all three schools had never shown any enthusiasm for such changes in the first place. For instance, 'Changed staff pay structures' was supported by less than 20% of Senior Leaders at data collection point 1, falling to 10% at data collection point 2 and 0% at the final data collection trawl. A similar pattern was seen in response to, 'Changed the performance management system for teachers' which was supported by less than 2%. Asked to explain these statistics, one Senior Leader commented, 'Conversion is a big decision. If people are not only going to accept it, but support it, we need them with us. These are successful schools and we can ill-afford to lose the people who make them successful.'

Non-controversial issues, such as collaboration across the Trust, and changing patterns of capital expenditure, were all encouraged by Governors and Senior Leaders during and after conversion - over 60% of both groups identifying these as priorities. Only one Governor from School B offered a dissenting voice, 'I think we've missed an opportunity. The academies' programme should be about innovation and doing things differently. That was our original plan, but things are exactly as they were before.' The Chair of Governors from School A expressed a different perspective, however, 'This was never about doing anything radically different. Why would we? This was about accessing the resources and opportunities of a new structure.' Senior Leaders, across all three schools, expressed the view that part of their role had been to temper some of the more contentious ideas of Governors in order to keep the process on track at local level and that Governors had increasingly seen the value of this approach.

Questionnaires 2 and 3, asked about the documentation Governors and Senior Leaders had found most useful during, and following, the conversion process. Alongside the timeline and action plan previously mentioned, the scheme of delegation and MAT development plan were regarded as fundamental. A common finding from the interviews, at data collection points 2 and 3, was the importance of getting the scheme of delegation completed

early. As the document that protects the constitutional arrangements of each individual school, and governs their relationship with the MAT, it was regarded as central to later decision-making, whilst also offering reassurance to schools that both their authority and independence were being respected.

Twelve months after conversion, dissatisfaction with the delegation of powers emerged, with the Chair of Governors from School A commenting, 'The scheme of delegation is inadequate for what we need. It does not cover the powers, duties and authority of the central team.' Over 70% of Governors, during the final phase of interviews, echoed these concerns. After one year of operation, the scheme of delegation was seen as insubstantial, failing to meet the needs of the schools and overly bureaucratic. One Governor from School B pointed out that, 'What is clear now is that what looked good in theory did not really work in practice.' In similar fashion, a Senior Leader from School C added, 'We did not know what to put in and what to leave out. Unfortunately, what we have left out has enabled certain areas of the Trust to take on an existence and life of their own.'

The MAT development plan was viewed positively by 90% of respondents across all three schools. In particular, the fact this was a 'live' and 'working' document' (Governors, Schools A and C) with 'all stakeholders involved in its construction' (Senior Leader, School A) was key. For the Chair of Governors from School B, 'The MAT development plan gave us a vision of the future. It meant that whilst all the messy components of the conversion were taking place, we could still see what the future outcome might be.' This comment was representative of the views of Senior Leaders, 'It is so easy to forget the strategic when you are focused on the operational. The MAT development plan kept the big picture foremost' (Headteacher, School B).

The identification of an influential person or persons(s) to lead the process and be the 'go to' with any queries was seen as central to a successful conversion, 'Credibility with school leaders and staff is essential in the person guiding the process - they need to be given time and put in place early' (Chair

of Governors, School B). In addition, on questionnaire 2, there were ten comments from Governors, and eight from Senior Leaders, identifying the importance of effective administrative support in ensuring a smooth conversion, especially in coordinating the relationship between different agencies and ensuring documentation was completed quickly and accurately.

Question 8, on questionnaire 2 asked whether the support from different national bodies (i.e. the DfE, ESFA, Ofsted, LA, RSC Office and Teaching Schools) during the conversion process was 'helpful, 'reasonably helpful' or 'unhelpful.' This was a follow-up question from questionnaire 1 where Governors were asked about the roles and responsibilities of these different organisations and, apart from Ofsted, found them only 'reasonably clear' or 'unclear.' Whilst the DfE and NSN, on questionnaire 2, were identified by 16 Governors', and 12 Senior Leaders', as 'reasonably helpful', the LA was described as 'unhelpful' by 11 (six Governors and five Senior Leaders). There was no organisation described as 'helpful.' During the second set of interviews, both Governors and Senior Leaders were critical of the lack of support for organisations looking to join MATs. Common concerns were: confusing and contradictory documentation on government websites; the scarcity of information about decision-making; the lack of a standardised approach to paperwork; and the minimal involvement of parents and pupils in decision making.

Criticism was expressed of the RSC's role in granting permission for the MAT to be established, 'The final decision is made behind closed doors without our involvement. We do not know what criteria is used nor whether there is an appeal mechanism' (Governor, School C). It was felt that, unlike academy conversion, where a 'conversion pack' was available to download from the DfE website, schools converting into MATs were left to their own devices. Six Governors pointed to the paucity of information on due diligence as a particular concern:

We are transferring multi-million-pound assets into a new entity with no possibility of reversal and yet the importance of this process gets less than a paragraph in government documentation. It is like they want to minimise possible controversy until it's irreversible, [and] there really needs to be clarity about which different organisations do what with checklists for Governors and Trustees of the key questions that need to be debated and explored before transfer.
(Governor, School A)

4.5.2 Analysis

There was a marked difference between Governors and Senior Leaders when it came to those factors necessary to ensure a smooth transition into the MAT. For Governors, across all three schools, the emphasis was on detailed and accurate documentation and advice, especially action plans and timelines. For Senior Leaders, it was the vision for the MAT, partnerships and communication: selling the benefits, allaying concerns and keeping people on side. Perhaps this is not surprising. Given their role, Governors were always likely to be more focused on the processes and procedures that ensured a legal and compliant transfer. Senior Leaders, on the other hand, were operating on the front line with a range of different stakeholders: teachers, support staff, parents and pupils and had to directly address the questions that arose. Their role was different but, arguably, more crucial and this was increasingly recognised by Governors, as was the importance of working closely together in partnership. Different Governors, in a different context, may not have accepted this, nor been willing to concede changes. One Senior Leader talked of a crucial early meeting where 'non-negotiables' were discussed and Senior Leaders made the price of their support very clear. It is apparent that Governors quickly realised the necessity of Senior Leaders being kept on-side as, 12 months after the conversion, none of the more controversial aspects of academy conversion had been implemented. A waning enthusiasm for upsetting the status quo became increasingly apparent as transition into the MAT progressed.

This research project focuses on Converter Academies that were already successful schools. As a result, it is likely that the opinions of Senior Leaders

were more influential than had the schools been deemed as under-performing. Despite this, two Governors expressed disquiet that too much deference had been shown to Senior Leaders. To them, whilst a beneficent relationship between both parties was essential to a smooth conversion, there was also a risk of stifling innovation. The evidence from this study would suggest that if opportunities to do things differently are not grasped early on in the conversion process, they might not happen at all. By the time of data collection point 3, it was interesting that not only had the percentage of changes *made* significantly decreased from those originally envisaged, but also the percentage of those changes *proposed*. It is outside the scope of this research project to discuss whether this is an issue pertinent only to Converter Academies, sponsored academies by their very nature often needing more intervention, but it does suggest a reluctance, especially by Senior Leaders, to take up the 'opportunities' offered by academy status and to do things differently.

For Governors, having a detailed action plan and timeline was essential to keeping the process on track, with the importance of regularly updating and reviewing these documents being emphasised. Having clear 'stepping-off' points was also seen as vital. These gave opportunities, throughout the conversion period, for a school to pause the transfer and seek further clarification, or to exit the process completely. Ten Governors, in the second round of interviews, mentioned the control and confidence provided by these 'markers', which also offered reassurance as new partnerships started to be formed.

The scheme of delegation that lays down the areas and authorities delegated, alongside who is responsible for what, was seen as indispensable over 90% of respondents. This is the key document that sets out autonomy and accountability responsibilities and where control is to be exercised. In this study, the scheme of delegation was completed early to reassure all parties that a 'devo-max' model would be implemented. Maximum delegation, and devolution of responsibility to individual schools, was seen as fundamental to

the successful operation of the MAT, and the first 'non-negotiable' agreed. Evidence from the second round of data collection, as the MAT was formed, showed this to be working well whilst, by the third data collection cycle, there was dissatisfaction with both the scheme and its structure. The reasons for this rapid turnabout were multi-faceted, including the difficulties of putting theory into practice, inappropriate levels of delegation and what had been omitted - it probably being inevitable that a document drawn up by committee, but never actioned, would need significant revision. For Senior Leaders in particular there was concern that the role of the central team in the MAT was not referenced. This was a similar emergent issue and key finding to research question 2, where it was felt the central team was expanding tangentially and incorporating new powers and responsibilities without discussion or consensus. Tension was evident between the vision for the MAT and its operationalisation, with the maximum devolution model seen as increasingly dysfunctional. Whilst the scheme of delegation was reviewed by the BoD on an annual basis, several respondents expressed regret that there was no mechanism for a more regular, termly, review post-conversion. Without this, structures and systems were implemented without agreement or redress, a 'disconnect' then developing between the initial aspirations for the MAT and its reality.

The importance of the MAT development plan, in terms of giving an overall strategy, shape and purpose to the Trust's work following conversion, was particularly interesting. Of the range of statutory and non-statutory documentation that every MAT is expected to provide on completion (DfE; 2013), a MAT development plan is not referenced. For respondents to this research project, its usefulness lay in focusing minds away from the mechanics of conversion to the bigger picture of what could be achieved in the longer term. These two levels of 'future-gazing' and 'navel-gazing', (Governor, School B), helped to overcome short-term obstacles and enabled the bigger picture to be kept in mind. Closely allied to this was the importance of an identifiable person or person(s) to lead the conversion process. This was another new partnership. Not only did this person(s) need to be given time,

and dedicated administrative support but, in this study, it was essential they had credibility with a wide range of stakeholders. By operating as both a 'conduit and a fulcrum' (Senior Leader, School A), the conversion lead(s) had oversight of the whole process, keeping it on track, pre-empting problems and communicating regularly with stakeholders.

Evidence from the second round of questionnaires and interviews shows the limited support that respondents received from the range of national bodies offering advice on academy conversions. Whilst the lack of engagement from the LA was perhaps not surprising, there was a distinct lack of clarity as to the responsibilities of national agencies, with many seen as having duplicated agendas and documentation. Respondents felt that the lack of transparency surrounding decision-making for schools joining MATs, was also particularly problematic. Within this, the role of the RSC in approving, or not approving, a MAT conversion was seen as a key issue, especially as this decision is the final step in the process and, the criteria on which judgements are based, are not published

Whilst there was some support for the usefulness of the information provided by the DfE and NSN, this was still disproportionately aimed at schools wishing to become academies, rather than academies transitioning into MATs. As a flagship government policy, it was perhaps surprising that more information was not available on the conversion process itself, although this could reflect the difficulty of incorporating the many different forms of MATs into a coherent policy. Regardless, the paucity of detailed guidance as to the implications of irreversible multi-million-pound land, asset and staff transfers, coupled with the lack of meaningful safeguards within the process, appears inexplicable.

4.6 Elements Hindering a Successful Conversion

4.6.1 Findings

Governors and Senior Leaders were asked on questionnaire two, and during the second and third set of interviews, about those factors that hindered a successful conversion into the MAT. Rather than providing a list of possible reasons, and asking for comments about these, this question was presented as a 'free text' box to gain greater insight into the process, and to avoid respondents simply stating the opposite of what supported a successful conversion. There was substantial unanimity to the responses with three main areas identified, all of which are linked to the concepts of autonomy and accountability. These are Governance, Finance (including Reserves) and Irreversibility.

The structure of MAT governance and the representation and weighting of voting rights for each school was a contentious one with 80% of Governors and 70% of Senior Leaders identifying it as an important issue. Representatives from School A felt that, as the largest school, they should have the greatest weighting on the BoD, whilst Schools B and C were concerned about being outvoted on key decisions. As one Governor from School C said, 'In the early days, it was all about proportional representation. I don't think we really understood the Board was there for the schools as a whole. We were still fighting our own corners.' Similarly, the Chair of Governors from School A pointed out, 'We (School A) educate 2200 pupils, School B educates 360. There is no way these are equivalent institutions. For that reason alone, we have to obtain a proportionate weighting.'

Twelve months after conversion, 'Governance' was only cited as an ongoing concern by 10% of Governors and by none of the Senior Leaders. Governors, from all three schools, explained the 'shaking down' (Governor, School C) of the different levels: BoD, LGB and sub-committees with responsibilities increasingly clarified. Another Governor from School B added, 'By airing concerns about the representation early, and addressing these, people knew

to tread carefully.’ Training from the Trust’s solicitors about the different responsibilities and powers within a MAT was seen by 90% of Governors as essential, with the Chair of Governors from School C adding:

It’s also about a shift in mindset. We no longer represent our individual schools. We work for all schools. The ‘double-hatting’ of people with roles both on the Board of Directors and Local Governing Bodies did not help at the start. Now, we feel confident enough to reconstitute the Board without any thoughts as to which schools Governors originally came from - it’s more skills based now.

The issue of Finance, its control and accountability, has already been identified as a key concern. Whilst the ‘top slice’, and the role and cost of the centralised team, surfaced 12 months after conversion, the issue of reserves, and how these could be drawn upon, was contentious early on. Six Governors expressed disquiet on finding that financial reserves would be pooled between institutions. As one Governor from School C wrote, ‘We were in a very strong position financially through prudent spending and forecasting. We were not about to give this up to another school.’ By contrast, a Governor from School B stated, ‘Financially, we were overspending. It was nice to know there was the support of the MAT if we needed it.’ The discovery that the legal entity was the MAT, and that following transfer all assets and liabilities were held by that body, created significant unease for respondents. As a result, a legally binding document was created to guarantee that any financial assets held in reserves, at the point of transfer, remained under the control of the individual schools.

The irreversibility of the decision to join a MAT was a factor referenced by 100% of Governors and 80% of Senior Leaders as potentially hindering the conversion process. This was particularly interesting as it was the one area out of participants’ control. Respondents from the three schools saw MAT conversion as ‘a leap into the unknown’ (Senior Leader, School B) but, ‘at least an unknown where the different players involved were known quantities’ (Governor, School A). During the second set of interviews, the overwhelming

view of respondents was that the process was imperfect but at least they were in charge of their own destiny and establishing the MAT on their terms.

4.6.2 Analysis

Governance, and how schools would be positioned following conversion, has been a recurrent theme of this research project. This is not surprising. As successful schools, used to a significant degree of independence and autonomy, it was always going to be difficult for Governors and Senior Leaders to compromise and accept that a new body, in the form of the BoD, would control affairs. This research project shows that by having discussions early, and agreeing how proportional representation might work in advance, a potential obstacle to forming a MAT can be avoided. By airing concerns at the outset, and agreeing a workable way forwards that is regarded as both fair and balanced, participants can be empowered to move onto the next steps. Coupled with this was the importance of training. By having a professional body talk through the legal and statutory arrangements of the new governance structure, including how the BoD and LGBs work in practice, both Governors and Senior Leaders were clear about what was being signed up to and how any key concerns could be mitigated. In this respect, new partnerships were both formed and strengthened. It was interesting that those Governors who expressed dissatisfaction with the governance arrangements, 12 months after conversion, had been absent for this training, a 'mind set' change being as important as a structural one. Once the respective roles of the Directors and Governors were clarified, and respondents understood they were looking after the interests of all pupils in the MAT, and not just those in individual schools, many of the initial loyalties and cliques disappeared. This process and resolution also helped to build trust, as stakeholders increasingly knew where accountabilities lay.

Finance, and the distribution of funding, has been a recurrent theme of this research project. At the third data collection point it centred around the 'top slice' and the role of the central team whilst, during the transfer, the issue of

reserves dominated proceedings. Whilst compromise over future governance was seen as both acceptable, and tolerable, the sharing and equal distribution of financial reserves was not. Indeed, such was the strength of feeling that it was only with a legal contract in place that Governors felt able to progress. 12 months later, this issue had not been returned to. This suggests that, despite what some Governors claimed, acting in the best interests of all pupils in the MAT still had its limits when it came to the sharing of monies. In this respect, not all partnerships were equal. Knowing this, the importance of due diligence, trust between parties, effective communication, and a respected person to lead the process, (all referenced as crucial to a smooth transition), was seen as even more important, with the MAT development plan presenting a view of the future that all parties could rally around.

The irreversibility of the decision to join a MAT was a greater concern for Governors than Senior Leaders. An explanation for this was that Senior Leaders had more familiarity with and trust in each other, whilst Governors only met six times a year. Despite the fact that alternative school organisational models such as 'umbrella trusts', 'partnerships' and 'Federations' had been discussed and explored, it is significant that the MAT still emerged as the preferred option. This is even more surprising considering that other structures are flexible and reversible and the MAT is not. Within this research project, there were no altruistic motives behind respondents' desire to create a MAT. Instead, explanations centred around the funding available to support MAT conversion, the sponsorship opportunities, the sense that other forms of partnership are too personality dependent, and a desire to formalise and co-ordinate school improvement activities - pragmatic considerations. Whilst irreversibility was seen as an obstacle during the conversion process, it was not an insurmountable one, as respondents were aware of this from the start and still willing to proceed.

4.7 Benefits and Issues 12 Months Later

4.7.1 Findings with Respect to Benefits

The educational benefits identified by both Governors and Senior Leaders, twelve months after conversion, focused almost exclusively on the sharing of expertise and resources, the professional development of staff and collaboration across schools. This was a common pattern across all three schools. The results are displayed in Table 4.7 below:

Table 4.7 What educational benefits have been realised since becoming an academy and joining a MAT?

	School A (Governors)	School A (Senior Leaders)	School B (Governors)	School B (Senior Leaders)	School C (Governors)	School C (Senior Leaders)
Improved outcomes for pupils			✓3		✓3	
Improved outcomes for disadvantaged pupils						
Sharing expertise and resources	✓1	✓1	✓1	✓1	✓1	✓1
Ability to focus on the core business of teaching and learning	✓3					
Professional development of staff	✓2	✓2	✓2	✓2	✓2	✓2
Other:		✓3		✓3		✓3

The ‘sharing of expertise and resources’ was seen as the biggest educational benefit of conversion, although this had not yet translated into ‘improved outcomes for pupils’, other than in the opinions of three Governors from Schools B and C. Similarly, ‘collaborating with other schools in a more formalised partnership’ (question 3), was seen by 100% of respondents as a positive change to emerge from the transfer process. During the third set of interviews, both Governors and Senior Leaders identified, ‘opportunities to work together cross-phase’ (Governor, School A), ‘leading Trust-wide network meetings’ (Senior Leader, School C) and, ‘tapping into the skills and expertise of colleagues from other Trust schools’ (Senior Leader, School B) as key benefits of the MAT transfer.

When questioned as to whether these benefits could have been realised through a different structure, such as a Federation or umbrella trust, opinion was divided. For the Chair of Governors of School C, ‘The truth is a lot of what

has been achieved in terms of shared working could have happened without any form of formalised partnership, but maybe the will would not have been there.' Similarly, for the Headteacher of School C, 'I think the MAT gave us an impetus as well as a new structure. Yes, we could have done stuff previously, but we didn't.' For 80% of Governors, and 90% of Senior Leaders, the MAT conversion was seen as catalytic to formalising arrangements and putting in place mechanisms that went beyond personalities and individuals, 'Before we lived together at times but had separate custody and visitation rights. Now we are together as a family, dysfunctional at times, but still a family' (Governor, School B). Supporting these findings, the 'free text' box entries in questionnaire 3 asking respondents to identify the 'biggest benefit' of academy conversion, all focused on school improvement activities and the sharing of best practice. Senior Leaders identified other educational benefits of the MAT including, 'Working closely together with the other Heads in the MAT has enabled me to share problems and discuss solutions' (Headteacher, School B); 'I feel less lonely in the job' (Headteacher, School C) and, 'There is a real benefit in being able to discuss new initiatives and approaches to teaching and learning and obtain colleagues' input' (Headteacher, School A).

One of the central aims of the academies' programme is to improve outcomes for all pupils and disadvantaged pupils in particular. Table 4.8 below summarises the outcomes for both of these groups for the two years preceding MAT conversion and the year following. For reasons of comparability, only nationally verified performance data has been included at the main assessment points of Key Stages 2 and 4.

Table 4.8 Key Stages 2 and 4 Attainment and Progress indicators - 2016 to 2018

(Grey = average. Light Green = above average. Dark Green = significantly above average, as measured by national comparators)

School	Indicator	2016	2017	2018
School A	KS4 Attainment 8	53.69	53.1	51.7
	KS4 Progress 8	0.12	0.06	0.13
	KS4 Basics (5+ in E&M)	61	58	44
	KS4 English 5+	76.9	70.5	60
	KS4 Maths 5+	82.7	66.5	49
	KS4 EBACC (average point score)	20.19	28.93	4.61
	KS4 Attainment 8 (disadvantaged)	47.29	43.9	44.3
	KS4 Progress 8 (disadvantaged)	0.05	-0.21	-0.16
	KS4 Basics (5+ in E&M) (disadvantaged)	47	35	26
	KS4 English 5+ (disadvantaged)	63	44	72
	KS4 Maths 5+ (disadvantaged)	55	47	54
	KS4 EBACC (average point score) (disadvantaged)	17.86	24.6	3.91
	KS5 A level VA (all)	0.16	0.01	-0.15
	KS5 Applied General VA (all)	0.13	0.24	-0.3
	KS5 A level VA (disadvantaged)	0.1	-0.56	-0.03
	KS5 Applied General VA (disadvantaged)	-0.27	-0.12	-0.3

School	Indicator	2016	2017	2018
School B	KS2 Reading Progress (all)	2.8	3.7	2
	KS2 Writing Progress (all)	5.1	1.9	1.4
	KS2 Maths Progress (all)	2.1	3.5	2.2
	KS2 Reading Progress (disadvantaged)	0.26	-3.5	0.7
	KS2 Writing Progress (disadvantaged)	4.82	6.8	1.2
	KS2 Maths Progress (disadvantaged)	1.42	0.4	-1.2
	Average Score Reading (all)	106	110	109
	Average Score Reading (disadvantaged)	103	102	106
	Average Score Maths(all)	105	110	108
	Average Score Maths (disadvantaged)	104	106	105

School	Indicator	2016	2017	2018
School C	KS2 Reading Progress (all)	1.22	4.4	3.8
	KS2 Writing Progress (all)	2.89	0.7	1.6
	KS2 Maths Progress (all)	2.06	5	4.7
	KS2 Reading Progress (disadvantaged)	3.45	4.6	7.5
	KS2 Writing Progress (disadvantaged)	2.88	0.5	6
	KS2 Maths Progress (disadvantaged)	0.38	3.6	5
	Average Score Reading (all)	107	112	111
	Average Score Reading (disadvantaged)	107	112	109
	Average Score Maths(all)	108	112	111
	Average Score Maths (disadvantaged)	104	111	106

As can be seen, the grey indicators suggest that the performance of School A was broadly in line with national averages (no green shading), the performance of School B somewhat above average (some light green shading), and the performance of School C well above average (some dark and light green shading).

'Improved outcomes for pupils' was regarded as an educational benefit of conversion by the Governors of Schools B and C, but was only third-choice preference. During interviews, the prevalent view was that it was still too early to say whether the MAT conversion had affected outcomes. As one Governor stated, 'It is really difficult to extrapolate the different factors that impact on success. I would not feel confident saying the MAT conversion had led to this improvement.' Senior Leaders echoed this view, 'I would not feel confident attributing any improvement to the MAT as I do not see how, at this stage, you can isolate the factors that might or might not be responsible' (Senior Leader, School C). Three Governors from School B, and four from School C, did attribute improved performance to the MAT, however, citing positives around school improvement work, networking and the sharing of expertise. None of these Governors could explain, however, how the impact of the MAT could be isolated from other factors that might also influence performance.

In terms of operational changes implemented since the transfer, benefits were expressed in terms of 'changing the pattern of capital expenditure' and the 'centralisation of functions such as finance'. 'Economies of scale' had not yet materialised. Opinion was divided between those respondents who felt cost-savings should have resulted immediately, and those who felt it was early days and savings would follow. One Governor from School A observed, 'We seem to be spending more money, not less. If the MAT is about achieving value for money, I haven't seen it', whilst a Senior Leader from School B noted, 'We may reduce expenditure further down the line, but it will be nowhere near what was estimated. I'm really annoyed that this is the position we are now in.' The creation of the CEO position in the MAT structure attracted

significant comment, both in questionnaire 3, and during the third round of interviews. Whilst having a nominated senior person to lead the MAT transfer was regarded as a positive during data collection point 2, the morphing of this position into the CEO role divided opinion. 30% of respondents questioned what the CEO actually did and whether it was just another tier of bureaucracy. As one Senior Leader put it, 'There is a clear job role and national standards for Headteachers but nothing for CEOs. How do you identify value for money?' Other responses were more positive, however, 'You need someone to draw it all together across the schools and the CEO can do that as they are not part of one school' (Governor, School A).

Whilst enhanced autonomy is cited as a central aim of the academies' policy, not one respondent identified this as a 'benefit' of conversion. During the interviews, respondents expressed the view that the structure of the MAT itself constrained autonomy by increasing centralisation and control. This was particularly evident in responses from Schools A and C that had previously held academy and foundation status respectively. Whilst the series of peer reviews and monitoring introduced by the Trust were seen as useful by 30% of respondents, 60% saw them as infringing on their self-determination and decision-making rights.

A common theme that emerged from the interviews was the importance of identifying, early in the MAT conversion process, what 'benefits' were expected post-conversion and how these would be measured. Without this, it was argued by six Senior Leaders and five Governors, there was always going to be difficulty in explaining what value the MAT added, or was expected to add. The Chair of Governors of School A expressed the view that:

We did not spend enough time planning for after the conversion. There was significant detail in our original transfer plans but we needed ways of measuring the success of the MAT, once established. I would really recommend anyone looking to convert to spend more time considering what they expect to get out of the final product.

4.7.2 Analysis with Respect to Benefits

It is interesting that the key motivators and benefits identified at the beginning of the MAT transfer process were not realised. 'Greater autonomy' and 'improved funding' were the two main drivers and yet, 12 months after conversion, neither had happened. In terms of the latter, the 'top slicing' of school finances by the MAT had negatively impacted on schools' budgets, with the centralisation and consolidation of different functions also impacting on autonomy. This was an issue for all three schools. Benefits realised were almost solely in terms of partnership working and professional development. Whilst, on the one hand, these were all educationally focused, and positively impacted on pupils, they could have been realised within a different school structure, such as a Federation or umbrella trust. For respondents to this research project, it was as much about perception as reality. Being locked into a structure provided an impetus to collaborate, and work formally together formally, which it was felt would not otherwise have happened. Interestingly, it also gave Senior Leaders a new body to complain about - the centralised function of the MAT - with its cost, seen by 40% of respondents, as diminishing local resources. This was ironic as the same criticism was frequently made about local authorities.

In terms of improved attainment and progress since joining the MAT, and as shown in Table 4.8, the evidence from this research project was inconclusive. For School C, the majority of progress and attainment indicators had improved, but not significantly. Where there had been some improvement, however, was in the progress of disadvantaged pupils - KS2 Mathematics progress improving from 0.38 to 5, Reading progress from 3.45 to 7.5 and Writing progress from 2.88 to 6. For School B, the picture was more mixed. KS2 Reading and Mathematics progress had all slightly declined but, despite this, progress was still significantly positive. For disadvantaged pupils, Reading progress had improved, but Writing and Mathematics progress had declined (4.82 to 1.2 and 1.42 to -1.2 respectively). For School A, comparisons were more difficult owing to national changes to secondary school performance measures. For example, whilst KS4 Attainment 8 data had

declined from 53.69 to 51.7 between 2016 and 2018, this statistic fails to account for the reduced number of GCSEs that were eligible for inclusion in the 2018 league tables. KS4 Progress 8 data had not changed significantly since School A joined the MAT - 0.12 in 2016 and 0.13 in 2018 - whilst KS4 Progress 8 (disadvantaged) showed a slight improvement from -0.21 in 2017 to -0.16 in 2018.

Senior Leaders, across all three schools, were in agreement that improving or declining outcomes for pupils could not be attributed to the MAT at this early stage. This was because several changes had been made prior to conversion and it was too early to judge impact. Governors of Schools B and C were more positive, citing cross-phase professional development and training as impacting on improved outcomes. However, it was telling that none of those interviewed could explain the direct correlation between improved results and joining the MAT, comments being made more on the basis of 'a gut feeling' (Governor, School B), and 'my impressions from frequently visiting the school' (Governor, School C), rather than any hard evidence. In many ways, these comments reflect the ideology around MATs themselves, with supporters attributing any improvement, however modest, to the new structures and detractors claiming the opposite.

Operational benefits were limited after 12 months. A common frustration amongst respondents was that proposed economies of scale had not taken place, and that the schools were significantly worse off financially than prior to conversion. In many ways, this was an incongruous finding as schools had been clear how MAT funding would work from the beginning. When explored further during the interviews, it became apparent that two of the schools had overestimated the savings to be made in the first 12 months and were reaping the effects of inadequate financial planning. Furthermore, unforeseen national funding cuts had also compounded the problem. The role of the CEO was similarly seen as beneficial to some but not to others, this being a partnership that was still evolving. Once again this suggests a lack of planning operationally and in terms of expectations and vision. With so much focus on

the conversion process itself, the importance of obtaining clarity around MAT roles, and their impact and accountability post-conversion, has been a key finding of this research project.

4.7.3 Findings with Respect to Remaining Issues

The core issues that remained 12 months after conversion were: (1) Autonomy/Centralised Function, (2) Finance/Control, and (3) Partnerships/Coordination of School Improvement across the MAT. These issues were consistent across all three schools with Senior Leaders proportionately more represented in the Autonomy/Centralised Function responses (10 Senior Leader responses to 18 Governors), with the opposite true for School Improvement (9 Senior Leaders responses to 12 Governors). Equal numbers, across all three schools, commented on Accountability/Finance. In response to the question asking, 'What has been the biggest drawback of academy conversion?', 100% of respondents identified one of the areas above.

4.7.3.1 Autonomy/Centralised Function

Concerns could be divided into three main areas: establishment, powers and accountability.

Establishment

Whilst the creation of a centralised team had been discussed and agreed during the pre-planning and planning stages of the conversion, respondents felt there was minimal consultation and a lack of transparency surrounding its constitution and make-up. As one Senior Leader put it, 'We have a staffing structure for each school and need to get BoD permission for each new appointment. No such requirement is placed on the central team.' During the third set of interviews, 80% of Governors and 100% of Senior Leaders commented that not enough attention had been paid during the conversion process itself, and within the scheme of delegation, to the role and responsibilities of the central team, 'To be honest, it's taken on a life of its own

with apparently no brakes or restrictions’ (Senior Leader, School A). One Governor, from School C, viewed this differently, however, ‘Whilst I agree there needs to be more openness around who does what, a lot of this is just Senior Leaders kicking back because they do not like their decisions being subject to scrutiny. Well, I am afraid that is what the MAT structure does.’

Powers

The power, influence and control of the central team was also seen as a concern. Nine Governors and eight Senior Leaders commented on the limitations of the scheme of delegation in holding the central team to account. Typical observations included, ‘The scheme of delegation mainly focuses on spending limits and authorisations. Whilst it is clear about the procedures schools need to follow, there is very little about the procedures the central team use’ (Senior Leader, School B) and ‘Different monitoring procedures keep being handed down from above. Can we resist them? Can we complain? How do we know and what would be the mechanism?’ (Senior Leader, School A). Other Governors regarded this as a legitimate role of the MAT:

*You cannot have it both ways. The very nature of a central team means certain things will be centralised and people in schools have to accept they lose some control. There is little point setting up a MAT and keeping things exactly the same.
(Chair of Governors, School A)*

Twelve respondents expressed concern over the tension between the ‘devo-max’ model of the MAT and the central team. As one Senior Leader from School B put it, ‘I do not think we got the balance of powers right. Schools were promised a ‘devo-max’ model and signed up to this. However, they also expressed a wish to have work centralised. It’s not clear now who does what.’

Accountability

The perceived lack of accountability of those people working centrally was also a source of criticism, especially from Senior Leaders. Concerns surrounded the pressures schools were under to produce results, their dealings with parents and pupils day-to-day, and the degree of external monitoring they received.

As one Senior Leader from School B put it:

I've taught for four hours, seen three sets of parents, supported a member of staff and run two meetings. Now I'm here with you. There is no way you can tell me sitting in an office several miles away and looking at a computer screen equates to that pressure.

A feeling of isolation and remoteness from those working centrally, coupled with a degree of resentment at what was seen as 'an easier life' (Senior Leader, School B), was evident in the responses of six Senior Leaders and ten Governors. The fact that Ofsted did not inspect MATs also received comment from four Senior Leaders and nine Governors.

Issues around how MATs might be judged, their effectiveness measured, and whether CEOs offer value for money, were recurrent themes of the third set of interviews, with several interviewees referencing the lack of a national benchmarking and accountability framework. Other respondents saw it differently. The Chairs of Governors of both Schools B and C regarded the MAT as sitting at the centre rather than on the periphery of accountability, one pointing out that Headteachers actually had less responsibility under this new arrangement, 'Heads are not responsible for the finances, difficult HR issues can be shunted to the MAT and, if a school fails its Ofsted, the MAT has to sort it out. It sounds pretty accountable to me' (Chair of Governors, School C).

4.7.3.2 Finance/Control

For 80% of Governors and 100% of Senior Leaders, 12 months after conversion, finance remained a key concern. Issues could be divided into the following areas: LACSEG, 'Top Slice' and cost of the Central Team.

LACSEG

As previously referenced, Schools B and C had estimated that they would be better off financially following the MAT conversion. Six Governors' questionnaire responses mentioned the changing nature of how the LACSEG was calculated nationally during the period of the conversion, expressing regret that 'due diligence' had taken place too early. One Senior Leader, in School C, calculated that had the academy conversion/transfer into the MAT taken place 12 months earlier, an additional £50,000.00 of recurrent funding would have been available to their school. The Chair of Governors of School B put this down to a lack of planning, 'We were extremely vigilant during the conversion, but we took our eye off the ball when it came to the money. Due diligence needs to be a continual process, not a one-off.' Three Governors from School C expressed similar views, although one pointed out it was almost impossible to keep up with the changing LACSEG formulae and that a conversion decision had to be made at some point. For Schools B and C, £60,000.00 and £50,000.00 were their final conversion LACSEG monies, against original estimates of £120,000.00 and £100,000.00.

'Top Slice'

80% of Governors and 70% of Senior Leaders, referenced the 'top slice' to the MAT as a concern. This was a new issue, as the 'top slice' had not been operationalised at the previous data collection stage. Concerns involved the percentage deducted, its uses, and value for money. 100% of Governors from School C, identified it as a major concern - several commenting on 'the perfect storm' (Governor, School C), of less than expected LACSEG funding combined with the 5% 'top slice' deduction. When questioned as to why the 'top slice'

was so contentious, when the 5% figure was agreed early in the conversion process, comments ranged from, 'I'm not sure what we are getting back is worth it' (Governor, School B) to 'As an outstanding school, we don't need so much support so why can't the percentage be lower?' (Governor, School A). Evidence from the Governors' interviews suggested that Senior Leaders were expressing their dissatisfaction directly to their LGBs and bypassing the central team, 'I don't receive a positive picture of how the 'top slice' is used. It's usually just a list of things that could be done with the money at a local level' (Governor, School A). Only in School B was there greater acknowledgement of the value of the 5% and the advice and expertise of the MAT central team.

Cost of the Central Team

Concerns over the use of the 'top slice' were linked to the centralised team and the salaries paid, 'There are a lot of well-paid people in the MAT. That is not, necessarily, a problem but I would like a clearer view of the value they are adding' (Governor, School A). 'Value-for-money' was a phrase that appeared in fifteen of the questionnaires, with the Headteacher of School C adding, 'In my view how the 5% is used should be a discussion involving all the schools. There is an assumption that you've got 95% of the budget so don't worry about the rest.' Clarity over the impact of the money, combined with control over how it was spent, were the most frequent criticisms expressed by Senior Leaders. 100% were clear about the services provided to each school, with a large proportion believing these to be of good quality. Lack of involvement in deciding them was the bigger complaint.

For Governors, issues of accountability and impact were central, 'We are always asking school staff to document impact - the "so what" question. It does not seem unreasonable to ask those working in the centre to do the same' (Chair of Governors, School C). During the third set of interviews, there was an acceptance amongst the majority of Governors that economies of scale take time, 'It's always going to take a few years for benefits to be realised. I

accept that. I just wish there was a clearer view of what these benefits are likely to be in the future' (Governor, School A). Senior Leaders, by contrast, appeared less understanding, 'Things seem to be costing more, not less. I assumed we'd save 10%-20% on each contract through bulk buying. That has not happened' (Senior Leader, School C). Evidence from the final data collection point shows ambivalence towards the roles of the CEO and CFO, this being a key change from the second collection point, where having a 'named' individual to lead the process was seen as invaluable.

4.7.3.3 Co-ordination of school improvement across the MAT

Whilst joint professional development activities, training and networking were key benefits of the conversion into the MAT, respondents expressed concern that little had been done to ensure sustainable improvement at scale. Nine of the Senior Leaders interviewed, during data collection point 3, felt that a MAT-wide strategy to address common issues was needed, especially around the progress of disadvantaged pupils and the more able. The quality assurance procedures, implemented from the centre, were seen by nine respondents as, 'too one-size-fits-all and repetitive' (Senior Leader, School C) or, 'fine for struggling schools but we are not struggling' (Senior Leader, School A). Similarly, the school improvement partners allocated to each school were judged, 'Of varying quality and too long out of schools' (Senior Leader, School B), or 'Insufficiently focused on what a good and outstanding school looks like' (Headteacher, School A). Ten Governors expressed the view, on their questionnaires, that the MAT should establish a 'good to outstanding school improvement programme' or a 'requires improvement to good strategy.' When questioned further during interview, there was a consensus that the MAT had the potential to drive school improvement in a way that individual schools could not, 'All that expertise, know-how and impetus should allow us to obtain accreditation and awards across the MAT, not just at local level' (Chair of Governors, School B). When questioned as to whether this could be seen as infringing on the 'devo-max' model of the MAT, Governors acknowledged this as a possible contradiction but felt, 'It is a

matter of communication and gaining consensus’ (Governor, School C). Similarly, those Senior Leaders interviewed did not feel it would be a problem, ‘As long as we are involved in the decisions that are being made and are seen as part of the solution’ (Headteacher, School A).

The final question, on questionnaire 3, asked Governors and Senior Leaders whether they now felt the decision to become an academy (if applicable) and join a MAT had been in their school’s best interests. The results are displayed in Table 4.9 below:

Table 4.9 Knowing what you do now, do you think the decision to convert into an academy, and join a MAT, was in the best interests of your school?

	School A (Govs)	School A (Senior Leaders)	School B (Govs)	School B (Senior Leaders)	School C (Govs)	School C (Senior Leaders)
Yes	10	4	9	3	5	2
No		2			1	
Unsure	2					1

These responses were followed up during the third set of interviews where the following viewpoints were expressed, ‘It’s better to be in charge of our own destiny than someone else controlling it’ (Governor, School C) and ‘It’s the future so there is not much point fighting it. There is no way of sponsoring other schools than in a MAT structure’ (Senior Leader, School A). Even those Governors who expressed reservations about the conversion, especially around issues of finance and autonomy, were generally supportive. This ambivalence was summed up by the Chair of Governors of School A, who said, ‘It’s kind of like we are replicating what the LA did before but at greater expense. However, there are no other feasible options and I’d rather be in bed with people I like than people I don’t.’

4.7.4 Analysis with Respect to Remaining Issues

The role of the central team in the MAT, and their appointment and powers, was a key issue, especially for Senior Leaders. This could be traced back to the initial planning for the MAT and the attention placed on the conversion

process itself, and getting the job done, rather than planning for the future. Whilst governance had been a contentious issue prior to the formation of the MAT, and then was no longer identified as a concern 12 months later, the development of the central team had followed the opposite path - emerging as a new issue post-conversion. Much of this concern surrounded a perceived lack of communication, checks and balances on authority and a remit that, it was felt, had never been adequately consulted upon. These were autonomy, accountability and partnership issues. For some Governors, the dissatisfaction expressed by Senior Leaders was seen as an inevitable response to greater scrutiny: Senior Leaders not liking the questioning and examining of their decisions. For others, it was a result of the school improvement strategies emerging from the MAT being insufficiently differentiated and better suited to struggling schools than those rated as 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted. Regardless, a consistent message from respondents was the need for early dialogue and discussion around the role of the central team.

Tension emerged between the 'devo-max' model, initially promoted by the MAT, and the increased centralisation of power and control. This was further compounded by the lack of national guidance around different MAT structures and their potential benefits and pitfalls. Dissatisfaction could be linked back to the scheme of delegation, lauded as invaluable at the point of transfer, but criticised later for not working on the ground. The perceived lack of MAT accountability in terms of performance measures, inspection and impact was also a criticism expressed by Governors and Senior Leaders. 40% of respondents from School A felt particularly aggrieved at having lost, in their opinion, not only the autonomy of being a standalone academy, but also the largest percentage of 'top slice' to the MAT. Considering that how MATs operate was known, and understood, prior to conversion this was an unexpected finding. Respondents felt that it was *their* money funding the MAT and, as a result, they wanted a greater say in how and where this was spent - issues of control and accountability again. This was perhaps inevitable given the inherent contradiction in combining autonomy and accountability

agendas. It was also evident that much of the work of the centralised function - bidding for new schools and networking with national agencies - was not particularly valued by respondents who still predominantly saw things through the lens of their own schools. This was a communication failing of those leading the conversion and highlighted the importance of clarifying the MAT's purpose and value.

The issue of the LACSEG, and schools receiving less money than anticipated, can be linked back to due diligence and the case study schools seeing this as a 'one-off' event rather than an ongoing process. Governors, by not keeping abreast of changing national funding parameters at the point of conversion, were reliant on information from six months previous, with their calculations over-estimating revenue by around 40%. The changing LACSEG formula then fed the discontent with the 'top slice' as both were seen as monies deducted from schools. Much of this discontent seemed to involve perceived value-for-money of centralised services with Governors being fed selective information from Headteachers and Senior Leaders. This echoes a concern expressed earlier, namely that Senior Leaders felt detached and isolated from discussions about the role, purpose and value of the centralised function, whilst also bringing to light the ideological dimension of the MAT set up. Whilst the tension between autonomy and accountability has already been referenced, the role of the LGB in terms of being a receptive repository for Senior Leaders' criticisms of the MAT was new.

Whereas nationally, MATs are presented as hierarchical structures from the BoD to LGBs, in this study this was only partially true. Concerns were moving upwards from the LGBs, with no mechanism for the BoD to express its concerns in the other direction. Furthermore, as the BoD was mainly composed of people with previous affiliations to particular schools, who also happened to sit at local level, there was further evidence of a disproportionate influence by Headteachers and Senior Leaders - new partnerships developing laterally as well as vertically. Even though the majority of respondents, during data collection point 3, claimed that governance was no longer a contentious

issue, responses to this question showed there was still some role ambiguity and conflicts of interest between 'double-hatted' Governors who sat on both the BoD and LGB.

The issue of school improvement across the MAT highlights the delicate balance between local and central control. For Senior Leaders, protective of their individual school's autonomy, the concern over the MAT's failure to deliver improvement activities across a range of schools appears incongruous. When explored in the interviews, however, it was the sense of scale and opportunity that the MAT could bring, and the role of Senior Leaders within this to identify improvement priorities, that was seen as lacking. Once again this came down to a perceived lack of communication, consultation and partnership between the central team and those working in schools. The importance of school improvement activities being jointly conceived and delivered was a recurrent theme of the third set of interviews, reflecting the concern that monitoring activities were insufficiently tailored to each school's individual circumstances.

Despite these reservations, respondents across all three schools overwhelmingly felt that conversion into the MAT had been in their school's best interests. The reasons given were less to do with the expressed advantages and disadvantages of conversion and more to do with the wider ideological and political environment. Respondents saw MATs in pragmatic terms as the preferred government structure and, by adopting this model, felt they would be favourably positioned for future opportunities, especially as regards sponsorship of new schools and access to additional income. Even respondents from School A, who had arguably lost most in terms of autonomy and finance, were mostly supportive. In many ways, this shows the power of government promotion, coupled with a decline in LA influence. It was seen as important to be in control of your own destiny, rather than risk having someone else decide it for you.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This chapter is divided into five main sections. It discusses the findings and analysis of each of the research questions through the prism of the conceptual framework, and theoretical review of the literature, identifying areas of commonality, difference, divergence and paradox. Where relevant, issues that are unique to the context of this research project are identified and discussed, in relation to the conclusions reached.

5.1 Pragmatic Autonomy: Motivations and Drivers

There were four main motivations expressed by Governors and Senior Leaders: enhanced autonomy, increased funding, greater collaboration and raised educational standards. Of these, the first two were highlighted as most important by over 90% of respondents. The importance of autonomy, and of schools being in charge of their own affairs, and outside of local government control, was a key initial driver, evident from the first two data collection points. Senior Leaders reflected the view of Ladd and Fiske (2016:12) that, ‘...educators on the ground understand best what needs to be done to raise standards in their schools and are in the best position to respond positively.’

In this research project, Governors and Senior Leaders did not have an agreed definition of autonomy, nor clarity as to how it should look post-conversion. This led to later ambiguity and conflict over what was trying to be achieved. Initially, for School A that had been an early academy converter during the ‘wild west’ years (Greany and Waterhouse, 2016), the MAT was viewed with a degree of suspicion and as a possible constraint on autonomy and freedom, (a perspective also referenced in PwC; 2008; Dunford, 2012; Simon et al., 2019), whilst for Schools B and C this was not an initial concern owing to a pre-existing degree of oversight from the LA. For Keddie (2015), and Salokangas and Ainscow (2018), it is the national competition and standards agenda that exerts a greater constraint on schools than a localised MAT, but this study demonstrates that, for schools used to a high degree of operational autonomy, the transition into a MAT can lead to accountability tensions.

Whilst increased autonomy for individual schools remained an important driver, 12 months after the MAT's formation, there was a growing acceptance amongst Governors and Senior Leaders that power and control had moved irretrievably to the centre. For Mansell (2016:9), autonomy should be, 'considered both in terms of which aspect of school management is covered and according to whether autonomy exists at the level of the individual school or at the level of an overarching academy trust.' In this study, clarification as to the different aspects of autonomy, and where accountability lay within the new structure, had not taken place. As a result, stakeholders were unclear about the degree of autonomy they were agreeing to.

The drive for enhanced autonomy led partnerships to change in type, importance and priority during this research project. At the beginning, no great appetite was found amongst Headteachers for completely severing ties with local government, echoing the findings of Gleeson (2011), and Smith and Abbott (2014). However, for Governors and Senior Leaders in Schools A and C, long detached from the LA, and with limited confidence in its abilities, the opportunity to lead local school improvement was welcomed. This is in line with the work of Hatcher (2014), Sandals and Bryant (2014) and Wilkins (2014; 2017) and further evidence of the new 'partnership' structures that have emerged since 2010.

Partnership and collaboration between academies were two areas where significant benefits emerged, although neither were initial motivations. These partnerships were partly driven by the newfound autonomy to choose and create. Opportunities to share professional knowledge and resources, and to receive enhanced professional development through placements at different Trust schools, were all seen as advantages of the new arrangement. The limited research about school improvement across MATs and Federations (Greany, 2018; Hill, 2018; Ofsted, 2019; Simon et al., 2019), would appear to support this finding, with evidence from case studies of teaching schools highlighting the positive impact of school-to-school professional development (Chapman et al., 2011; Sandals and Bryant, 2014; Muijs, 2015).

Despite the government's substantial focus on MATs as drivers of school improvement, as Greany (2018:42) points out, to date, '...very few studies have focused on how school groups secure sustainable improvement at scale' (Greany, 2018:42).

Autonomous control of admissions was an important motivator for respondents from Schools B and C. Greater control was sought to prevent the LA directing 'hard-to-place' pupils into the two schools. Any form of selection inevitably involves de-selection and this motivation, expressed by both Governors and Senior Leaders, mirrors the findings of Tough and Brooks (2007), Larsen et al. (2011) and Pearson/RSA (2013), who identified covert selection of pupils as a possible consequence of the academies' programme. Who is accountable for all children within an area, not just those within the catchment of the MAT, became a contentious issue. With control exercised increasingly at academy and MAT level, the ability of a local authority to act in the best interests of all pupils within a locality is severely constrained. This is a position also referenced by HofCESC (2015), and Andrews and Perera (2017). The findings from this research project differed from the literature in that Governors and Senior Leaders welcomed the opportunity to take fewer challenging pupils. It is outside the scope of this research project to consider whether this was a localised issue, or part of a more general national trend, but it does suggest that the moral purpose identified by Larsen et al. (2011:116) of, '...ensuring fair and equitable access for all pupils, and particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds...', may not always be shared by those leading and managing schools. The degree of 'partnership' between different agencies, therefore, is very much down to the motivations and values of different individuals. This research project found that autonomy does not necessarily bring enhanced partnerships, especially with organisations outside of a MAT's sphere of influence. In fact, both commitment and involvement were increasingly discretionary, with academies and MATs choosing who they engaged with.

Funding was a key issue at each stage of the conversion journey. It was both a motivator for conversion, (schools believing they would be financially better off as academies), and a source of concern after conversion, (schools being worse off financially as a result of the 'top slicing' by the MAT and the LACSEG having less value). Research in this area (Bassett et al., 2012; Cirin, 2014; Mansell, 2016; Beaumont et al., 2019) supports this study's finding that enhanced funding and autonomy are the two main conversion drivers. Across all three schools, there was a lack of due diligence as to how finances would look post-conversion. Given that one of the three key functions of a school's governing body is, 'overseeing the financial performance of the school and making sure its money is well spent' (NGA; 2019), it is concerning that there is no legal requirement for a school to justify the cost of conversion, nor to explore the potential financial gains or losses. It is also concerning that the literature is largely silent on this issue.

Whilst 'due diligence' is a statutory part of the conversion process, there is no checklist of questions - the process only considering the current financial performance of a school, not the future picture. This is a 'control' issue and of even greater concern considering that, once a school has joined a MAT, all funding is pooled. Individual institutions with large surpluses could, therefore, find their budgets used to support other schools without agreement or veto. The DfE (2016b:47) sounds a warning about the paradoxical nature of seeking financial autonomy, 'The transition from a standalone academy to a MAT will not automatically bring economies of scale or efficiencies because there may also be additional central costs.' This exactly matched the findings of this study. As far as I am aware, no research currently explores the longitudinal impact on school funding of joining a MAT, nor whether it offers value for money, although an article by Grubb (2019:1) refers to schools being, '...misled into converting under the illusion of improving finances.' This would appear to be an important area for further research.

The ideological nature of the academies' programme lies at the centre of conceptualising the journey towards autonomy. Respondents were divided in their opinions, initially unsure whether it was 'evolutionary' or 'revolutionary'. For Governors from Schools A and C, changes compared to standalone Academy and Foundation status were minimal, reflecting the conclusions reached by Curtis et al. (2008), Pearson/RSA (2013), and the NSN (2015). Similarly, for respondents from School B, 'revolution' quickly became 'evolution', as their new 'freedoms' were not seen as anything radically different from those held pre-conversion. This is in line with the Pearson/RSA (2013), and Cirin (2014) publications that found little difference between the two sectors in terms of how autonomy was exercised. Both studies, however, only consider sponsored academies and it is possible that, with the final data collection stage of this research project conducted just 12 months after conversion, change would happen later. The final interviews showed that opinion had shifted significantly, with the majority of respondents regarding the academies' programme as evolutionary with only modest changes implemented. This reflects the findings of Ball (2011), Exley and Ball (2011), Gillard (2011), Gunter (2011) and Mansell (2016).

The words 'ideological' and 'political' were used interchangeably by respondents with the academies' programme seen as ideological by design and political in nature. The view of Gillard (2011) that the academies' programme had twin aims: to convert the nation's schools from a public service to a market, and to transfer power from local to central government, reflected the opinion of the Chair of Governors from School A, who referred to MATs as 'private organisations.' Referencing the GM schools of the 1980s, she echoed the views of Baker (2010:1) and his insistence that the academies' programme was a, '...recreation of the grant-maintained (GM) schools created by Mrs Thatcher's government in 1988' with control shifting from local to central government. One Senior Leader in School C spoke of 'taking local authorities out of the educational equation and replacing them with private interests.' This supports Beckett's (2011:xxi) claim that academies are, 'essentially a political construct, not an ideological one' with little supporting

evidence on educational grounds (Wilby, 2009; Exley and Ball, 2011; Mansell, 2016). The views of Adonis (2008) and Gove (2012) that academies are not about ideology but evidence-based and practical (Gove, 2012:2) were not representative of respondents' views in this research project. In fact, two of the central aims of the academies' movement: to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, and to allow school leaders greater opportunities to innovate, went unmentioned.

In terms of the motivations of stakeholders in establishing MATs, identified by Simon et al. (2019), in this research project there was little altruistic or moral purpose. Instead, the pragmatic motivations of maintaining independence, taking responsibility for one's own destiny, and aligning schools for new opportunities and funding were paramount. The contribution of academies and MATs to raising educational standards nationally was viewed with some cynicism, as was the role of autonomy in achieving this. For respondents to this research project, standards were important, but the pragmatic issues of funding and admissions more pressing. This supports the views of Mansell (2016), Hill (2018) and Beaumont et al. (2019) that managing day-to-day concerns will always be the biggest priority for Senior Leaders. Twelve months after conversion, however, raising standards increased in importance as opportunities for collaboration became more embedded. Whilst there were no major differences between the schools in terms of the substance of responses, participants from Schools B and C did see greater opportunities for school leaders to determine their own agendas, than those from School A. The sidelining of local authorities was seen as a deliberate aim of the academies' policy, matching the views of Ball (2011), Gunter (2011) and Mansell (2016). With new partnerships having to be established between a range of different policy actors, academies and MATs had the challenging task of trying to navigate in an increasingly fragmented educational landscape (Wilkins, 2017; Rayner et al., 2018; Bubb et al., 2019). Whilst for Wilkins (2017), changes to the middle tier were about bringing MATs directly under the control of central government, this research project found that current levels of disorganisation and confusion made scrutiny and

oversight distinctly arbitrary. This was an unexpected outcome of enhancing autonomy, central government lacking the capacity to oversee, intervene and direct.

Issues of control and power were evident in the responses to questions about alternative school structures. Those respondents who had knowledge of Federations were concerned about their lack of promotion by government, and the lack of incentivisation, the same issues identified by Lindsay et al. (2007), Hatcher (2014) and Mansell (2014). Pragmatism was, once again, the key driver. This was despite the published evidence of Federations raising standards (Ofsted, 2011; Smith, 2011; NSCL; 2012). It was felt that a lack of private sector involvement, and the continued relationship with the LA, prejudiced the government against such structures, resulting in little encouragement to follow this route. Once again this was a 'control' issue, with respondents preferring a relationship with central to local government. Reasons for this were multifaceted and concerned perceived greater autonomy, along with the belief that central government would be less interfering and more generous financially. For School C, which had explored alternative school structures in depth, the MAT model had been preferred owing to the certainty it offered - informal partnerships being seen as too personality-led and lacking sustainability. This is in line with the findings of Lindsay et al. (2007).

5.2 Problematic Autonomy: Issues and Concerns

Autonomy was viewed positively at the first two data collection points but then increasingly negatively - not as a concept to be owned and grown - but one bequeathed from elsewhere, with the understanding that it could be removed. The loss of autonomy and independence for schools joining MATs is a concern reflected in the literature, (PwC; 2008; Dunford, 2012; Hill et al., 2012; HofCESC; 2015; 2017; Beaumont et al., 2019; Simon et al., 2019). This usually takes two forms: confusion over the respective roles of the BoD and LGBs, (OECD; 2010; Hill et al., 2012; Salokangas and Chapman, 2014;

Grotberg and Robb, 2015; Finch et al., 2016; Salt, 2016), and concern over the increased centralisation of policies and practices that curtail individual authority (Lewis and Murphy, 2008; Dunford, 2012; Wolfe, 2013; HofCESC; 2015; Wilkins, 2017). The tension between autonomy and accountability never seems to be adequately resolved. In this study, it was the smaller schools joining the MAT that felt the most vulnerable, reflecting the observation of Hill et al. (2012:48) that, 'A key learning point seems to be that schools and sponsors need to understand from the start the nature of the relationship that is being proposed between each other.' What Hill et al. (2012) do not consider, however, is that at any time this level of delegated authority can be changed, through the control exercised by the BoD. This was the main issue for participants in this study. As representation on the BoD was proportionate, depending upon school size, there was always the possibility of smaller institutions being outvoted, even though, in theory, the Board should act in the best interests of the Trust as a whole.

Issues of control and accountability, as evident through the increased centralisation and oversight by the MAT, were key concerns for respondents, and also evident in the literature (Dunford, 2012; HofCESC; 2015; 2017; Mansell, 2016; Wilkins, 2017; Beaumont et al., 2019; Hickie, 2019). For Dunford (2012), excessive accountability reduces freedom and autonomy, whilst, for Mansell (2016), clarity around school and Trust autonomy is fundamental. A methodological limitation of much of the literature is that it does not distinguish between the different types of academies, making it impossible to conclude whether Converter Academies are given more freedom than those in sponsored arrangements, which would appear logical. For the academy and foundation schools in this research project, previously used to significant independence, the increased centralisation of function and oversight was problematic. This reflects the House of Commons Education Select Committee (HofCESC; 2015:12) observation that, 'One paradox of the academy programme is that for schools in chains it may well lead to less autonomy at the school level than in maintained schools.' Once again this is linked to governance because, if schools are clear from the outset about the

relative powers of the BoD and LGBs, the oversight and regulatory functions at each level are not contentious (Grotberg and Robb, 2015; Wilshaw, 2016; Beaumont et al., 2019). Getting the balance between autonomy and accountability right within a MAT seems a particularly challenging task, with tension possible at every level (Ofsted, 2019).

Where control and power were exercised varied throughout the conversion process. By tracking the transfer at three different points, it became apparent that, at the point of conversion, schools were generally satisfied with the balance of powers being proposed. Twelve months later, there was dissatisfaction that the original promises had not materialised. This finding is similar to a characteristic of effective MAT governance suggested by the DfE in that:

*The board and its executive leaders are transparent with any school looking to join the MAT about the level of delegated power that will be vested at a local level and the circumstances in which this may vary over time.
(HofCESC; 2016:20)*

Salokangas and Chapman (2014) point out the complexities for schools of trying to identify the arrangements most suitable for their needs, with responsibilities and accountabilities divided across so many different bodies. In this research project, respondents felt generally well informed about the balance of power, and scheme of delegation, but still expressed concerns. This is hardly surprising given that the literature around conversion available on the government website (GOV.UK; 2016) does not discuss governance changes or the respective powers of academy trusts and LGBs. This is despite the balance between accountability and autonomy being identified as a key issue as long ago as 2008 (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008). As the government advice has not been updated since 2016, the House of Commons Education Select Committee (2017) recommendations on transparency have also not been incorporated.

Issues of control and accountability surfaced over the role of the central team within the MAT and the increased centralisation of policies and procedures. These were both a result of role ambiguity between leaders in schools and those in the MAT, an area underdeveloped in the literature. The CEO and CFO are mandatory positions within a MAT, but the majority of Senior Leaders felt there needed to be greater clarity and discussion in respect of these roles. This reflects the observations of Salokangas and Ainscow (2018), Greany (2018) and Ofsted (2019) that, within a MAT structure, individual schools are more accountable than the MAT itself. After all, when a school is inspected, it is the name of the school and headteacher on the report, not the MAT and CEO. A further interesting observation from this study was that how the centralised team operates post-conversion was central to the future success of the MAT, and yet very little consideration is given to it prior to the transfer - the focus being almost solely on governance. An explanation for this might be the statutory responsibilities of the latter, but for Senior Leaders, the development, authority and oversight functions of the central team were of greater significance. In this research project, Senior Leaders felt there was inadequate consultation about the role and remit of the central team, and that some partnerships were more equal than others. This was also linked to a lack of clarity around the purposes of the MAT. Whilst Simon et al. (2019) talk of the altruistic, moral and pragmatic considerations that leaders make when forming MATs, by focusing exclusively on pragmatic issues, respondents to this research project failed to articulate a vision of what they wanted to achieve. As a consequence, there was no touchstone of values upon which to base decision-making.

Partnership tensions between schools in MATs, and between schools and the MAT, were evident in the concerns expressed over the sustainability of school improvement activities, and the foundations that needed to be in place to support these. This reflects the limited research on MAT school improvement (Hutchings et al., 2014; HofCESC; 2015; Greany, 2018). Greany (2018) looked at school improvement across 31 MATs and identified the five 'fundamentals' and five 'strategic areas' (Greany, 2018:13) necessary for sustainable

improvement at scale. It was these 'building blocks' that respondents to this research project struggled to identify. Whilst Hill (2016:1) talks of the best academy chains having, '...thought about, evolved and systemised their approach to school improvement', participants in this study felt that, during the initial planning and design of the MAT, more attention should have been paid to the strategy and culture of school improvement. This was also an accountability issue as the local authority would previously have provided such guidance.

Within the 'devo-max' model promoted by the Trust, it was unclear where responsibility for school improvement lay, with the systems imposed being insufficiently differentiated (as also noted by Greany, 2018 and Ofsted, 2019). Greany and Higham (2018) consider the age and make-up of different MATs and whether this influences their approach to school improvement. Despite older MATs having had longer to develop their systems, processes and cultures, age was not a distinguishing factor in their research. Instead, MAT approaches to school improvement were largely contingent on the success of the schools within them. This was a possible explanation for some of the dissatisfaction expressed by respondents to this study - the schools within the MAT were successful, individual, institutions and yet the centralised school improvement strategies were akin to those employed with struggling schools; Greany (2018:45) identifying those 'cultural challenges' whereby, '...a higher-performing Converter Academy within the group expected a much higher level of autonomy and did not want to participate fully in the work of the trust.'

An ideological divide separates those commentators who believe private providers have no place in the delivery of public services (Gunter, 2012; Ball, 2013; Reform Group, 2016), and others, (Curtis et al., 2008; Moynihan, 2008; Chapman et al., 2011; Sandals and Bryant, 2014), who believe that the private sector can offer better quality and value for money. Once again this is an autonomy issue, with the private sector seen as offering a choice and diversity missing from the maintained sector. Respondents to this research project

expressed no concerns over areas such as finance and HR being privately provided, but balked at the idea of special educational needs, child protection or disability support being provided in this way. The irony is, however, regardless of school status, since 1988, outsourcing of services such as HR and finance has been an available option for all schools (Goodman and Burton, 2012; Rayner et al., 2018).

The changing nature of partnerships within the middle tier, and the inability of a local authority to plan and oversee provision for all young people (Dunford, 2012; Hill, 2012), has already been referenced. In this study, most respondents saw the LA as just a provider of 'services' which, in theory, could be replaced. The shrinking of the LA's role and responsibilities were neither a major issue nor concern. Governors and Senior Leaders actively welcomed the opportunity to gain greater control, despite any implications for equity and access. Respondents' motivations in this research project were mainly driven by self-interest and the needs of the MAT. Whilst for Ladd and Fiske (2016:34), 'The new system is ill equipped to replace authorities as providers of these functions', for the respondents to this research project, the demise of existing LA partnerships was not especially mourned. Two reasons were offered in explanation. Firstly, the depletion of local-authority services over a ten-year period had already forced schools to source support elsewhere. Seen by one respondent as, 'a law of *intended* consequences', this closely matches the beliefs of Harvey (2007), Woods et al. (2007), Ball (2011), Gunter (2011) and Hicks (2017), whereby national reductions in education funding were ideologically driven and deliberately engineered to force schools down the academization route. This view chimed with that of respondents to this study. Secondly, there was support within all three schools for the private sector to be given the opportunity to deliver some services previously provided by local authorities. This reflected a willingness amongst Senior Leaders to engage with the new 'partnerships' that had emerged post-2010 and a growing realisation that existing structures were no longer sustainable.

Financial autonomy was a consistent concern in this research project, reflecting the views of Mansell (2016), Beaumont et al. (2019) and Hickie (2019). This could be divided into three main areas: additional funds made available through the LACSEG (autonomy), the central services provided by the MAT (control), and the economies of scale and value for money of these services (accountability). Of these three, only the first two have received any significant attention from researchers. Additional funding being the main impetus behind conversion reflects the findings of Bassett et al. (2012), Cirin (2014) and Mansell (2016). In reality, Governors and Senior Leaders found extra income through any additional grants to be negligible (DfE; 2016; Andrews and Perera, 2017; Education Policy Institute, 2017; Grubb, 2019; Hickie, 2019). Respondents from all three schools expressed concern about the impact of the 5% 'top slice' and whether it provided value for money. This was possibly the most important accountability issue identified. For School A, this was particularly acute as it was paying almost £500,000.00 per annum into the MAT. Beaumont et al. (2019) conclude:

*When we talk to single unit academies about why they do not want to join a MAT, one of the most common responses is that they don't see the value in paying money to a MAT that they could spend on their own school - the amount they have to pay to cover central services is seen as a major stumbling block.
(Beaumont et al., 2019:13)*

Where this study differs from the literature is that these conversations were taking place following conversion, rather than prior to it.

The financial efficiencies and economies of scale often associated with MATs (DfES; 2005; NCSL; 2005, 2013; Crowhurst and Bellio, 2015; Grotberg and Robb, 2015) proved elusive in this study, as is the case in later research (Finch et al., 2016; Education Policy Institute, 2017; Beaumont et al., 2019). One explanation could be that the MAT had only been operational for 12 months with insufficient time to re-tender contracts or change staffing. Whilst the Education Policy Institute (2017:21) observes, 'We would expect that efficiency savings and economies of scale are unlikely to be made straight

away, but rather that they would build over time', respondents from all three schools had not factored any such delay into their financial planning. Once again, this reflects the findings of the literature whereby the length of time MATs were established, and the number of academies within them, were critical to achieving economies of scale (DfES; 2016; Finch et al., 2016; Andrews and Perera, 2017; Bubb et al., 2019).

In terms of the value for money and accountability of MAT services, and the 'top slice' that funds them, there is little published research. Part of this is due to the difficulty of obtaining information, coupled with the subjectivity of what 'value-for-money' actually looks like, with some critics claiming obfuscation is a deliberate policy of government. After all, it is difficult to be held accountable if your responsibilities are never defined in the first place. More likely, however, it results from this still being a relatively new area for researchers. Dickens (2016) comments, 'It is up to academy trusts to decide which services they provide for schools as part of management fees... this has led to large variances in provision' but did not consider what constituted 'best value.' For Beaumont et al. (2019:9), 'Trusts need to ensure they understand their central costs so that there is a clear logic behind what they are charging.' The wide variation in 'top slice' figures, identified by Hickie (2019), suggests this is now a factor for schools considering joining MATs, and there will need to be greater analysis of 'value' in the future, although for sponsored academies, such a choice does not exist. The Education Policy Institute (2017:21) point out that, 'Broadly, the figures... demonstrate that many academies face an initial cost in back office spending after joining or establishing a MAT', but these potential additional costs are not referenced in the advice for converting academies. The value for money of MAT services, and a comparison of quality and cost with that previously provided by LAs, would seem a fruitful area for further research, the only study, at present, being that of Bubb et al. (2019) which shows the middle tier functions for MATs being 44% more expensive than their local authority equivalents.

Autonomy may also lead to problems with identity, especially the related concepts of individuality and ethos. The New Schools Network (2015) outlines the distinctive features of academy schools (see Appendix A) but makes no reference to school identity. Neither are the two concepts linked in the OECD-PISA (2011) and DfE (2014b) studies. Whilst for Chapman et al. (2011), and Jensen et al. (2013), the increased autonomy of academies and MATs provides an opportunity to enhance individuality and promote innovation, for the respondents to this research project, joining a MAT was more likely to lead to a loss of identity. This was associated with two main areas. Firstly, the control exercised by the BoD and sponsor (if applicable) to implement and direct change against the wishes of an LGB (a concern also noted in PwC; 2008; Salokangas and Chapman, 2014; Wilkins, 2014; 2017; Mansell, 2016; HofCESC; 2017; Salokangas and Ainscow, 2018) and, secondly, the concern about the MAT creating a franchise-type branding that stifled creativity and infringed on a school's identity (as reported by Lewis and Murphy, 2008; HofCESC; 2015; Mansell, 2016; Wilkins, 2017). Within the literature (NCSL; 2005; Percy, 2006; Smith, 2011), the difficulties of imposing a shared vision, and balancing the needs of one school against those of a Federation, are mentioned. In this study concerns revolved more around issues of imposition, than disenfranchisement, with Headteachers, in particular, perceiving the MAT as constraining their ability to develop their own school's identity.

Whilst the idea of Headteachers operating as managers and implementers, rather than leaders, is briefly referenced in the literature on sponsored academies (Lewis and Murphy, 2008; Mansell, 2016), its recent emergence in research on Converter Academies, (Fellows et al., 2019; Ofsted, 2019), suggests its growing relevance as an issue. This study extended previous research by finding that Headteachers' roles were not only changing but so were their skill sets. For critics such as Moynihan (2008), and Grotberg and Robb (2015), it is both inefficient and unnecessary for Headteachers to have finance and budgeting skills, which can be more efficiently provided through a corporate centre. This study found that such a structure only works in a

MAT with a high degree of centralised control. With the maximum devolution model in operation in this research project, Headteachers needed to be able to understand, and analyse, budgetary and cost implications. Paradoxically, it was the financial control exercised by the MAT that had led to Headteachers becoming deskilled in this area. With 95% of budgets still under local control, further conflict then emerged with the centre.

5.3 Balancing Autonomy: Elements Supporting a Successful Conversion

There is very little research examining the actual conversion process into a MAT as most studies focus on fully formed institutions, whether academy, Federation or MAT, and not on their interim transfer status. In this respect, this research study offers a new perspective on the 'journey' itself and the autonomy paradox it creates. 'Partnerships', working with others, sensitively leading the transfer process, obtaining consensus, and bringing people together were all seen by Senior Leaders as crucial components of a successful transfer. This reflects the findings of NCSL (2011:4) that, 'Becoming an academy is a joint decision so it is important that all stakeholders are consulted. If you act as a group, it reduces the risk of disagreement and increases the degree of shared commitment' and 'Managing relationships is unique to every MAT, but must always be a priority' (NCTL; 2014a). A limitation of the NCSL (2011) publication is that it focuses solely on 'converter' academies - it is difficult to imagine how such a consensus could be reached if schools were forced into a sponsored arrangement against their wishes. As the literature shows, the concept of 'autonomy' is often experienced very differently within the sponsored and converter sectors.

Achieving a successful conversion for Governors was less about interpersonal and social skills and more about action plans, timelines, accurate and timely documentation and resolving issues of control and accountability. The importance of the scheme of delegation, and the putting together of a document that both reflects the present, and points the way to the future, is mentioned in several studies (DfE; 2016; Finch et al., 2016; Wilshaw, 2016;

HofCESC; 2017). Concerns over accountability in governance, and ensuring clarity of power and responsibility, is also referenced as far back as the PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC; 2008) analysis. These concerns are echoed by NCTL (2014b) and NGA (2016) with HofCESC (2017) observing:

...there is still significant confusion about the move to boards of trustees being the accountable bodies for MATs. This move has not been communicated well enough by the department and has led schools to join or start trusts without full knowledge of how their governance structure will change.
(HofCESC; 2017:14)

Where this research project differs from the literature is that obtaining clarity around the scheme of delegation was initially not difficult. Instead, problems emerged 12 months later, when it was seen as increasingly unfit for purpose. The 'wrestling' of control that emerged then led to tension between the BoD and LGBs. Discussing non-negotiables early was seen as crucial to achieving a successful transition. This is reflected in the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL; 2016) guidance that:

It's much better to tackle any difficult conversations early in the process rather than finding later on that you've wasted time exploring a partnership that was never going to work or, worse, finding yourself part of an organization that you wished you'd never joined.
(ASCL; 2016:5)

This was also a key finding of this study.

The majority of the limited research on academy conversion finishes at the point of conversion. Once the MAT is formed, there is an assumption that the process has ended and what happens afterwards is incidental. Accountabilities change with the establishment of a new MAT, and this study found the transfer to be the beginning of a new, equally important, journey. With autonomy bequeathed at the discretion of the centre, (Glatter, 2012; HofCESC; 2015; Wilkins, 2017), ensuring the balance between accountability and autonomy post-conversion is crucial. In this study, dispensing with steering groups at the point of conversion was retrospectively seen as a

mistake, Greany (2018:16) pointing out, the ‘significant but also contentious’ standardisation decisions that need to follow MAT conversion and the importance of a forum to discuss these. The NCSL (2011:31) advise that, ‘Gaining academy status is only the start of the challenge facing all academy schools’ and, ‘It is time to start thinking in more detail about your plans for the longer term’ (NCSL; 2011:29), but offers no guidance as to what these ‘plans’ might be. For respondents to this research project, having a half-termly review of the scheme of delegation in the first 12 months, would have helped deal with unintended consequences before they became problems. Whilst the development plan was found to be particularly useful, because it allowed a focus on the longer-term aspirations and purposes of the MAT, and away from the day-to-day minutiae of the transfer process, there is no reference to such a document in the literature. This is another example of the limited research that considers partnerships, structures, and systems post-conversion.

Autonomous decision making in areas such as setting the length of the school day and term, and establishing pay and conditions for staff, were key drivers in the Pearson/RSA (2013:44-45) report. In this research project, Governors were initially enthusiastic for change but, by the third data collection point, their keenness had dissipated, with the status quo quickly being re-asserted. This is in line with the literature that suggests academies and MATs are only making very modest changes and little that is controversial. As Mansell (2016:10) explains, ‘notional freedom in some... areas had not translated into the reality of how academies have operated.’ Changing teachers’ pay and conditions was low on the list of priorities for schools becoming academies (Bassett et al., 2012; Reform, 2012; Pearson/RSA; 2013; Mansell, 2016), mainly because of the difficulty in challenging nationally agreed terms of service and recruiting and retaining staff. As Bassett et al. (2012) conclude:

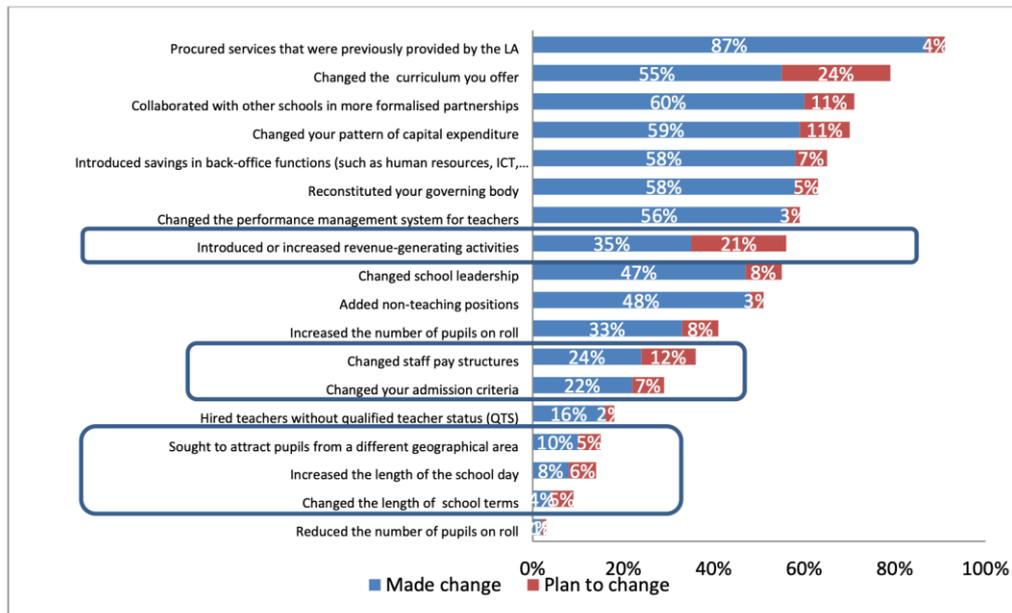
Some schools report changing their pay policy in order to pay good teachers more but two thirds of academies (65 per cent) have not altered staff terms and conditions and have no plans to do so. Many agreed with staff or governors on conversion that they would not make changes. (Bassett et al., 2012:5)

Whilst Senior Leaders in this research project had not obtained agreement in advance to existing conditions of service being retained, they had successfully persuaded Governors that it would be counterproductive to make such changes. Whilst seen as fundamental to ensuring a successful transition, in this study, it is unlikely in underperforming schools that Senior Leaders would have had such influence. In this respect, this may well be a finding unique to this context, but it does show how control and power can fluctuate during conversion. It also shows that if the relationships between Governors and Senior Leaders are not right, then there can be a power struggle with the potential to destabilise the whole process.

Innovation and autonomy are linked, with the latter frequently claimed to enhance the former, by providing the time and space to do things differently. In this research project there was little innovation at school level, reflecting the views of Gunter (2011), Mansell (2016) and Greany and Higham (2018). Cirin (2014:6), in a report commissioned by the DfE, paints a contrasting picture claiming, 'academies have used their freedoms to innovate and improve.' His survey of 720 academies found that, '84 per cent are now linking pay to performance' (Cirin, 2014:6) but does not mention that this was a statutory requirement for all schools from 2013. His study suffers from the clear methodological weakness of not distinguishing between sponsored and Converter Academies and, more importantly, not having a control group - maintained schools were not included in the report. Without such a comparison group, it is difficult to know to what extent the autonomy and 'freedoms' reported by academies are directly linked with academization or otherwise.

The somewhat optimistic viewpoint of Cirin (2014) is reflected in Table 5.0 overleaf which makes an interesting comparison with Tables 4.5 and 4.6 on page 184:

Table 5.0 Changes made (or planned) since becoming an academy



Base: All academies 720

(Cirin, 2014:18)

Even Cirin’s (2014) findings demonstrate the relatively small number of academies changing, or planning to change, pay and conditions or the length of school days/terms. Whilst for Cirin (2014), the longer an academy has been open, the more likely it is to have made changes, this research project does not support these conclusions. In fact, the opposite was found with proposals to change potentially controversial areas receding, not increasing, over time.

A notable reason for the limited innovation of the schools in this study was the unresolved tension between centralised and local control - autonomy and accountability again. Senior Leaders were unsure of their freedoms and discretions and whether they would be allowed to exercise them. This is in line with the work of Pearson/RSA (2013), HofCESC (2015), Ladd and Fiske (2016) and Mansell (2016) but contrary to the findings of Cirin (2014). Furthermore, whilst Cirin (2014) did not specifically study MATs, it would be interesting to know whether joining a MAT has any impact on planning or making changes, and whether a sponsored or converter arrangement affects a willingness to change - anecdotal evidence suggesting Converter Academy

chains are 'tweaking rather than radically rethinking' (Hill et al. 2012:50) existing processes and structures. Whilst the work of Gunter (2011), and Eyles and Machin (2014), suggests MATs are ideologically conservative, hindering rather than encouraging innovation, in this study Senior Leaders were also reluctant to do things differently. Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, greater potential autonomy resulted in a greater reluctance to embrace change.

The importance of an effective partnership with the lead person managing the conversion is a consistent theme of the literature (NCSL; 2011; Hatcher, 2014; NCTL; 2014a; Grotberg and Robb, 2015; Beaumont et al., 2019), 'During the conversion phase to become a MAT, make sure the Chair of Governance leads with the Principal of the MAT and establishes the governance structures and roles and responsibilities' (NCSL; 2011:28). Similarly, the importance of this person having credibility, and being effective at managing relationships, is emphasised in several case studies (NCTL; 2014b; Sandals and Bryant, 2014). These findings were echoed here, although a point of difference with the literature in that when the CEO designate role morphed into the CEO permanent role, dissatisfaction was expressed. Once again this is explained by the lack of clarity and consultation in deciding roles and accountabilities post-conversion. In terms of support from other bodies during the conversion process, the views of respondents to this research project reflect the observation of Salokangas and Chapman (2014) that:

...schools considering both conversion to academy status and joining an existing chain of academies face a complex task of identifying the most suitable arrangements for their needs. Detailed information...is not necessarily transparent or available to the general public, making navigation in this market particularly problematic.
(Salokangas and Chapman, 2014:383)

In this study, the lack of support from the local authority concurs with previous research (NCSL; 2011; Hatcher, 2014) as does the contention that much nationally produced documentation is confusing and contradictory (Hill, 2012; Salokangas and Chapman, 2014; HofCESC; 2016; HofCPAC; 2018).

Whilst this can be explained by the confused accountabilities of many agencies of the middle tier, it does lead to a particular reliance on those managing the process to advise, guide and update.

The importance of effective administrative support to assist those leading the process, and to help facilitate a smooth conversion, was an incidental but important finding of this study and not evidenced within the literature. Furthermore, the lack of transparency regarding the decision making of RSCs and Headteacher Boards noted in the literature, (Pearson/RSA; 2013; HofCESC; 2015, 2016; Mansell, 2016; McInerney, 2017), and trying to identify where control and power sits within the middle tier, was also a frustration for respondents. Making contact with the RSC's office in advance of submission, whilst investigating the very limited information available on how decisions might be reached, was another factor seen as essential in facilitating a successful conversion.

5.4 Deceptive Autonomy: Elements Hindering a Successful Conversion

Control and power in relation to governance dominate the literature on academies and MATs. The importance of clearly delineated responsibilities between the BoD and LGB, with an explicit understanding of structures and control post-conversion, is a consistent theme (NCTL; 2014a; Grotberg and Robb, 2015; Ladd and Fiske, 2016; Wilshaw, 2016; Beaumont et al., 2019; Ofsted, 2019). This reflects the findings of this research project. However, whereas the literature on MAT governance is almost exclusively focused on making decisions post-conversion, this study found that clarity over future structures needed to be agreed at the outset. The reasons for this were twofold: to avoid the process being derailed further down the line, and to avoid difficulties following the transfer. Understanding where accountability sits, and why, within a future structure is critical. Only Hill et al. (2012:48) identify, '...that schools and sponsors need to understand from the start the nature of the relationship that is being proposed between each other' but do not elaborate further. Salt (2016:8) criticises sponsors and trust boards for

failing to communicate the reality of decision-making and power structures to incoming academies, warning, 'Disguise this at your peril!' Similar concerns about Governors being ill-informed of their changed duties within a MAT structure have also been expressed by the HofCPAC (2015) and HofCESC (2017).

By addressing issues early, and producing a sustainable and agreed future governance model, respondents to this study overcame one of the biggest barriers to conversion at the beginning. This 'partnership' approach to negotiations characterised many of the earlier discussions but was largely abandoned post-conversion under the assumption that work was complete. This is a similar assumption to assuming transition into the MAT is the end point of the journey, rather than part of it. By moving towards a skills-based BoD, 12 months after conversion, Governors were also able to fulfil a recommendation of the DfE (2018) that, 'The board should identify the skills and experience that it needs, and address any gaps...This is particularly important at key transition points' (Academies Financial Handbook, 2018: para.1.3.10).

Accountabilities of all parties are partly addressed through the 'due diligence' undertaken prior to conversion. Within this, the importance of understanding the financial position of an incoming school is mentioned, (NCSL; 2011; DfE; 2016; Greenway, 2016 cited in McGill, 2016; Andrews and Perera, 2017; Beaumont et al., 2019), although primarily in terms of educational performance and staffing structures, rather than funding and resources. The NCSL (2011:21) advises, 'At any point before signing the funding agreement, the trust can decide not to proceed if it believes that conversion would not, after all, be in the school's best interests.' What it does not say is that a school and Trust's best interests might not always coincide. In this study, all schools had financial surpluses, although some were much more substantial than others. This made conversion technically easier as there were no deficits to eradicate. Despite this, however, the strength of feeling around the issue of financial reserves, shows it would have been a major barrier to converting if

a legal technicality had not been found. NCSL (2011:4) quotes a Headteacher who advises, 'You really need to know and understand the process, and if you don't yet, find a way to make damn sure you do.' With multi-million-pound capital and revenue assets transferring to new ownership, this would appear wise advice.

The irreversibility of MAT conversion is briefly referenced in the literature (HofCPAC; 2015; Mansell, 2016; Salt, 2016; Roberts, 2018). In many ways this is another 'control' issue as, once the MAT is formed, schools forfeit their individual negotiating rights. In an article by Roberts (2018), for the Times Educational Supplement, Sir David Carter the National Schools Commissioner, is quoted as saying, 'MATs should consider offering schools an associate membership of their trust for a year to help persuade them to join'; West and Wolfe (2018:6) suggesting there should be 'mobility of academies between MATs'. This idea whereby, 'schools could live together before marrying' (Governor, School A) was never enacted. When re-brokering does occur, it is only allowed between MATs, not as a reversion to standalone academy or maintained status. This fact alone demonstrates the ideological reverence with which MATs are viewed by government and reinforces the importance of having clear roles and accountabilities. Once a school joins a MAT, it no longer exists as an autonomous legal entity (Wolfe, 2013; HofCPAC; 2015; Mansell, 2016), 'the decision to join a MAT is irrevocable, even if the MAT turns out to be dysfunctional' (Ladd and Fiske, 2016:27). It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that a federated structure which allows for much greater flexibility in terms of control, power and relationships (Lindsay et al., 2007; Bassett et al., 2012; Mansell, 2016) but was rejected by respondents to this research project over concerns of sustainability and rigour (Lindsay et al., 2007; Bassett et al., 2012). Instead, the prospect of what Salt (2016:8) refers to as, 'marriage without divorce' was preferred.

5.5 Illusory Autonomy: Benefits and Issues 12 Months Later

Partnership and collaboration emerged as the main benefits 12 months after conversion. Whilst there is surprisingly little research on the educational benefits of conversion, other than a narrow focus on performance outcomes, this finding runs contrary to the HofCESC (2015) claim that competition, rather than collaboration, is the key to raising standards. This study suggests that collaboration is still important, but within the different partnerships and hierarchies - internal as well as external - and the wide variety of providers that now occupy the middle tier (Ball, 2013; Rayner et al., 2018). Whereas in a maintained system, partners are fixed, and cooperation a requirement rather than an expectation, within these new middle tier arrangements, academies and MATs can be more autonomous, selectively, engaging and disengaging with different organisations as required. The system is now much more fluid.

The question of whether or not a school-led system has the capacity to raise standards nationally is a recurrent one (Dunford, 2012; Pritchard and Crossley-Holland, 2012; Parish, Baxter and Sandals, 2012; Simon et al., 2019), with Sandals and Bryant (2014) claiming that Headteachers welcome the opportunity to lead school improvement. In this research project, this was only partly true. Headteachers welcomed the opportunity to be involved in the planning and design of school improvement activities but did not necessarily seek responsibility for delivering or evaluating them. This suggests it is not only the capacity within the system that might be an issue, but the motivation and drive of those serving within it. The role of Federations in driving school improvement is better documented, (Percy, 2006; NCSL; 2011; Smith, 2011), but the majority of these studies are small scale with observations more anecdotal than evidential. Hill et al. (2012) conclude that the chain structure of a MAT offers the greatest opportunities for best practice development and capacity enhancement, with informal networking between Headteachers a tangible benefit. This matches the findings of this study, whereby the more formalised partnership of the MAT

appears to have catalysed school improvement activities. However, these could equally have been delivered through a different organizational arrangement, suggesting the benefits frequently cited of the MAT structure are more ideological than real.

It is interesting that, 12 months after conversion, nine Senior Leaders felt opportunities to develop school improvement activities across the MAT were under-developed with quality assurance procedures insufficiently differentiating between schools. This is in line with previous research (Hutchings et al., 2014; Carter, 2015; HofCESC; 2015; Wilshaw, 2016; 2017; Wilkins, 2017; Ofsted, 2019). School improvement was seen as trying to fix what was not working, rather than developing what was already successful (Hill et al., 2012; Greany, 2018; Ofsted, 2019). As Greany (2018:26) observes, 'MATs and Federations must learn to operate as both hierarchies and networks, drawing on a mix of central and school-based capacity and with aligned practices in appropriate areas', with Ofsted (2019:21) noting, 'Sharing good practice is not always done efficiently or effectively.' The formation of the MAT led to changes in schools' working practices which took time to embed. For Simon et al. (2019), those academies that converted into MATs owing to altruistic or moralistic imperatives, were more likely to have a coherence and logic to their decision-making. By contrast, those who converted for pragmatic reasons, as in this research project, could lack a guiding set of principles upon which to base their actions. Decision making, in these cases, was then often arbitrary and isolationist, a position also seen in the schools in this study.

In terms of educational outcomes, the findings of this research project reflect the national picture (Jensen et al., 2013; Machin and Silva, 2013; Finch et al., 2014; Worth, 2014; HofCESC; 2015; Worth, 2015; Townsley and Andrews, 2017; Ofsted, 2019; Fellows et al., 2019) as there were no significant differences in attainment or progress as a result of conversion. Nor was there any evidence of improved outcomes immediately prior to the conversion, as evidenced in the work of Andrews and Perera (2017). For many researchers,

(Gunter, 2011; Ball, 2013; Glatter, 2018), this lack of definitive performance improvement is more evidence of the academies' programme being an ideological rather than an educational construct. As Mansell (2017:4) concludes, '...evidence as to the positive impact of academies compared to other schools remains slight - going-on-nonexistent.' Whilst in this study it was more difficult to distinguish academy conversion from MAT conversion, (as two schools became academies and transferred into the MAT at the same time), the limited evidence available on MAT performance shows no significant difference in outcomes with comparator LA schools (McDool, 2016; Bernardinelli et al., 2018).

When analysing performance data on academies and MATs, there is a difficulty in forming conclusions. The complexity and fluidity of the academies' programme create real methodological challenges when comparisons need to be made (Wilby, 2009; Stevens, 2011; Goodman and Burton, 2012; West and Bailey, 2013; Briggs and Simons, 2014; Gorard, 2014; Hutchings et al., 2014; Sims et al., 2015; Mansell, 2016; Greany, 2018). This is further compounded by the ever-changing nature of national performance measures between 2009 and 2019. A further complication is caused by the unavailability of much of the data needed to make accurate comparisons. This can be seen in the case of the research of Bubb et al. (2019), where the income and expenditure of 19,452 LA schools and academies is examined in relation to middle tier functions. Despite the comprehensiveness of the methodology, Bubb et al. (2019) are unable to evaluate the middle tier costs of the ESFA and RSCs, as the DfE does not keep separate statistics. It is frequently claimed that ideologies are never completely consistent with the facts of the experiences they claim to interpret, and one way of avoiding detailed scrutiny is simply not to collect the data upon which such scrutiny depends. For critics of the academies' programme, this is seen as a deliberate strategy. Many researchers claim that it is still too early to judge the impact of MAT conversion on educational outcomes, (Machin, 2012; Mansell, 2016; Townsley and Andrews, 2017), especially when Converter Academies were previously 'good' or 'outstanding' schools with high levels of attainment. This

reflects the views of the respondents to this study, who suggested this research project needed to be extended over a five-year period in order to produce meaningful performance comparisons. For those 40% of Governors and Senior Leaders who believed the conversion had already produced improvements in outcomes, their views appeared more ideological than evidential, a situation also reported by Exley and Ball (2011) and Fellows et al. (2019).

The challenge of balancing autonomous schools with MAT accountability is referenced in a small, but growing, body of literature (Dunford, 2012; Glatter, 2012; HofCESC; 2015; 2017; Ladd and Fiske, 2016; Mansell, 2016; Wilkins, 2017; Beaumont et al., 2019; Ofsted, 2019). However, whilst this is almost exclusively focused on the governance structures of MATs, and the role conflict and ambiguity between the BoD and LGBs, this study identified a different problem - that of the centralised function in a MAT and its establishment, control and accountability. This tension was further exacerbated by the maximum devolution structure promised to individual schools. For Rayner et al. (2018:156), 'The rhetoric about freedom from LA control is countered by the fact that membership of a MAT entails new controls and accountabilities' with Ofsted (2019:23) observing that, 'While there is therefore ample evidence that MATs hold their schools to account, the extent to which they effectively monitor their own performance is far more limited.' These views chimed with those of respondents to this research project, who were not only questioning how the MAT was held accountable, but, in certain instances, actively influencing directors and governors to work against it.

Funding is directly linked with the concepts of autonomy, control and accountability. It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that one of the biggest motivations behind the MAT conversion was financial advantage (Bassett et al., 2012; Mansell, 2016) and yet, 12 months after conversion, this was identified as one of the biggest drawbacks. At the time of writing, only very recent research, (Beaumont et al., 2019; Fellows et al., 2019; Ofsted, 2019),

considers the issue of the 'top slice', and the detrimental impact this can have on a school's finances. In fact, Beaumont et al. (2019) identify it as the single biggest reason why individual schools do not wish to join MATs. Whilst it is frequently claimed pupils cost less to educate in MATs than in individual academies or maintained schools (Crowhurst and Bellio, 2015; Townsley and Andrews, 2017) estimated savings are negligible, bordering on non-existent.

Control of the 'top slice', and accountability for where it was spent, especially in terms of value-for-money, was a major concern for respondents. This differs from the literature, wherein the 'principle' of the 'top slice' rather than its 'value' was the central issue. Whilst economies of scale, created by new MAT partnerships, have long been touted as an advantage of the Federation and MAT programmes, (NCSL; 2005; 2011; Glatter and Harvey, 2006; Lindsay et al., 2007; Chapman et al., 2011; Grotberg and Robb, 2015), more recent studies have introduced a note of caution (DfE; 2016; Finch et al., 2016; Townsley and Andrews, 2017; Grubb, 2019). The need for vigilance over the changing value of the LACSEG (DfE; 2012b), treating due diligence as an ongoing rather than one off process, (Beaumont et al., 2019; Fellows et al., 2019), whilst being clear about the nature and quality of services provided through the 'top slice', were all key findings of this research project. Interestingly, the importance of thinking through financial implications carefully is a feature of most work on Federations (NCSL; 2005; Lindsay et al., 2007; Hill, 2011), but much less prevalent within the literature on academies and MATs.

Hunt (2015:36), notes the importance of, 'Never letting the truth get in the way of a convincing ideology' and, to the best of my knowledge, there are no case studies that revisit and re-evaluate decision making following the conversion into a MAT. National statistics are not kept on how many schools started out on the MAT journey but decided not to complete it, and their reasoning, although the research of Rayner et al. (2018) describes a Catholic school that decided it was 'academized' enough within the maintained system. Despite the reservations expressed by respondents to this study, the

main attractions of the MAT were a long-term sustainable structure and being well-placed for future opportunities. Of the eight reasons cited by Cirin (2014) as to why schools become academies, and join MATs, political expediency is not amongst them, although the research of Simon et al. (2019) identifies a pragmatism amongst some school leaders, whereby conversion is seen as a logical next step. Sandals and Bryant (2014) identify a small, but growing number of entrepreneurial Headteachers wishing to develop school-led systems and to take responsibility for school improvement. These same Senior Leaders would often establish MATs in the belief that the government would then prioritise resource in their direction. Whilst there is insufficient evidence to suggest it is to this 'entrepreneurial' group that respondents to this research project most naturally belong, the strategic alignment of school structures with current political thinking was seen as essential. Respondents understood the ideology behind the academies' programme and, in most cases, did not agree with it. Nonetheless, their principles were constrained by the twin-drivers of pragmatism and necessity.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

This research project focused on the autonomy paradoxes facing Governors and Senior Leaders before, during, and after the conversion into a Multi-Academy Trust. Through the creation of a theoretical review of the literature, distilled into a conceptual framework of key themes, the findings of this study have been presented, alongside an analysis of their significance and importance to the research questions.

This study touched upon new ground by shedding light on the conversion process itself and the interpersonal and relational experiences of Governors and Senior Leaders. Drawing together perspectives from three schools, from three different backgrounds, maintained, foundation and academy, it followed their journey through the early discussions about forming and joining a MAT, through the conversion process itself, and then, crucially, for 12 months following the transition. This offered a new viewpoint on structures, systems and processes post-conversion. As a qualitative study, understanding the meaning participants give to events, anticipated influences, and the context in which they operate, whilst concurrently developing theories and causal explanations (Maxwell, 1998:121), is of particular relevance. My intention was to move beyond the 'standards not structures' (DfE; 1997) argument that has dominated the educational landscape of England over the last 25 years. Whilst the former focuses almost exclusively on the performance outcomes of different institutions, the latter evaluates different organisational models looking for a universal elixir to issues of under-achievement and social exclusion. Both, inevitably, end in disappointment. Adopting the constructivist approach, outlined by Merriam (1988), with its combination of particularistic, descriptive and heuristic interpretation, allowed for an especially detailed analysis of the motivations, drivers, benefits and difficulties experienced by Governors and Senior Leaders as they oversaw the transition into a new entity.

The final chapter examines the research questions in the light of the journeys undertaken and sets out the key findings of this study. It draws together new perspectives on the conversion process itself, by using an iterative process of familiarisation and examination of the literature, identifying a conceptual framework, collecting case study data at three different points, interpreting and mapping this, and then applying the data to the methodological framework. The research questions are also discussed as a basis for further research, their contribution to theory, and for possible recommendations to policy makers, Governors and Senior Leaders. Lastly, I sum up my final thoughts, considering what I would do differently if approaching the research again, and where, I believe, the findings to have particular importance and originality.

6.1 Research Questions Revisited

In this section, the main research questions are revisited, alongside a brief summary of the key findings and analysis.

Overarching research question:

How is the interplay between autonomy and accountability experienced at different points in the evolution of a MAT?

Tensions between autonomy and accountability run throughout the academy and MAT programmes. Prior to conversion, one of the main aims of Governors and Senior Leaders was enhanced autonomy and the freedom to make decisions outside of local-authority control. Autonomy was initially seen in practical terms: the ability to spend money on local resources, buy services from a range of providers, and to make decisions that reflected an individual school's context. Even at this early stage, however, problems emerged, most notably in the failure to define autonomy, its purpose and meaning. As a result, participants were unclear what they were trying to achieve and then disappointed when they did not achieve it - the first of many paradoxes.

During the transition process, Governors increasingly saw autonomy in terms of innovation, with radical proposals to change pay and conditions and extend the length of the school day and term. For Senior Leaders, by contrast, autonomy was about taking back control and preserving the status quo.

With the transfer into the MAT, the uncertainty around what autonomy meant, what it looked like on the ground, and its relation to accountability needed to be recalibrated. This did not happen. For Governors and Senior Leaders used to a high degree of operational freedom, the centralizing tendencies of the MAT became problematic. Many of the areas over which respondents had previously held autonomy were now controlled centrally, setting up tensions between leaders in schools and leaders in the Trust. The oversight function of the MAT, in terms of outcomes and school improvement, led to a degree of accountability that was both unexpected and resented, with both Governors and Senior Leaders seeing it as infringing on local control.

Autonomy and accountability tensions were also reflected in governance. Both the BoD and the LGBs lacked clearly delineated responsibilities, making decision-making difficult. This then led each to blame the other when issues were not resolved. These internal tensions within the MAT were also a microcosm of those being played out nationally. The new range of policy actors occupying the middle tier had contradictory and overlapping functions and powers, exercising variable degrees of control and influence over the schools and MAT. As a result, Governors and Senior Leaders were having to navigate an increasingly complex world, where accountabilities were divided between a wide range of organisations. With the introduction of RSCs, and new national performance measures, a hierarchical line of authority and accountability was created, running from the BoD to the RSC and then to the Secretary of State. With powers invested in the MAT, rather than within individual schools, staffing costs absorbing 85% of budget, and a government-preferred curriculum in the EBACC, opportunities for autonomous decision-making and innovation are increasingly limited, with autonomy largely illusory. This reflects another paradox of the academies' programme whereby

schools within MATs can operate with less autonomy than those in the maintained sector.

Supplementary questions:

(1) What are the motivations and drivers for Governors and Senior Leaders throughout the MAT journey?

This research project found that Governors and Senior Leaders looking to join a MAT had similar motivations regardless of the background or age-range of their school. Of most importance were the attitude, mind set and risk-taking willingness of the decision makers. In this study, there was no ideological belief in the efficacy of the MAT model. Instead, political expediency and pragmatism were the key drivers for respondents. Respondents were not convinced that academies and MATs would raise educational standards nationally, nor that this was a central aim of the academies' programme, which was seen to be more about reducing the control and power of local authorities.

During the initial discussions about whether to form a MAT, and at the point of conversion, greater autonomy and increased funding were the biggest drivers, reflecting the findings of Bassett et al. (2012) and Mansell (2016). Paradoxically, in terms of autonomy, the increased centralisation of systems, policies and personnel, driven by the MAT, increased the level of scrutiny and oversight. Senior Leaders, in particular, felt their discretion and freedoms had been curtailed. A similar issue surrounded finance. With national cuts to school funding, and the waning influence of LAs, the temptation to secure additional monies from central government was irresistible. Twenty-four months later, however, whilst this original motivation had stayed the same, the reality was very different. The combination of reduced LACSEG monies, and the 'top slice' of funding into the MAT, had left all three schools in a financially worse position than prior to conversion.

Partnership, collaboration, and the sharing of best practice were originally low down the list of priorities for Governors and Senior Leaders. However, they gained increased importance at the point of conversion and later. The MAT structure, as a single legal entity, was both catalyst and enabler, impelling and directing respondents to work together, whilst encouraging expertise to be shared across Trust schools. This was the area where the majority of respondents felt that the MAT had added most value.

(2) What are the issues and concerns at different stages?

Both Governors and Senior Leaders expressed similar concerns at the beginning of the conversion process and there was no discernible difference whether the school was maintained, foundation or academy. Common issues were 'losing individual school identity' and 'losing local control.' 'Losing individual school identity' was seen as related to, but distinct from, autonomy and more to do with ethos, culture and distinctiveness. For respondents to this research project, protecting the uniqueness of each school was a non-negotiable and a 'control' issue they were unwilling to relinquish. As a result, it was enshrined within the scheme of delegation and did not re-emerge as a concern later. Obtaining the correct balance between autonomy and accountability, by contrast, was an issue at the first and last data collection points, and an early indicator of the tension between the maximum devolution structure promised to individual schools and the centralising tendencies of the MAT - what Greany and Higham (2018:35) refer to as 'coercive autonomy.' This tension was never satisfactorily resolved. Whereas the relative powers and responsibilities of the BoD and LGBs were discussed at length during the conversion process, and differences resolved before the transfer happened, the role of the central team was never given the same level of scrutiny. As a result, it assumed its own powers and direction. In effect, this was a crucial partnership that was ignored.

The importance of not losing sight of the big picture and future goals, when immersed in the minutiae of the conversion process, is an important finding

of this study. What autonomy looks like post-conversion, the powers and accountability of the central team, and the value the MAT is expected to add, need to be considered prior to conversion and not retrofitted. Without this clarity, new issues, contradictions and paradoxes emerge. Respondents expressed dissatisfaction at the lack of a sustainable, coherent school improvement strategy across the MAT, whilst also insisting that each school should be free to make its own decisions. Post-conversion, there is a need for a formal mechanism to review and discuss who is doing what, and why, alongside a system of ongoing evaluation, where issues and queries can be raised. If such a mechanism had been in place, as it was prior to conversion, it is likely that many of the problems which surfaced could have been resolved.

In this study, the category of school has much less significance for the MAT journey undertaken than the motivations and prior experiences of those making the decisions. Across all three schools, conversion was viewed as a positive decision and politically expedient. Where experiences differed was in the capacity of each school to deal with the new situations it faced. School A, a previous standalone academy, found the external scrutiny of the MAT most problematic as it had been largely left alone to monitor its own performance. As the largest school, their financial contribution to the MAT was the biggest, and the transparency over the funding formulae enabled them to see what had been 'lost.' For School B, previously maintained, central provision was seen more positively. Services such as admissions, governance and human resources were picked up by the MAT, enabling school leaders to concentrate on their educational function. Moreover, the degree of external scrutiny provided by the LA was simply replaced by that of the MAT and seen as normal practice. For School C, there was a frustration that the 'halfway house' of foundation status had not led to more tangible benefits: priority over school admissions into the secondary school and enhanced opportunities for professional development across the Trust, being particularly welcomed outcomes of academisation. As School C had the largest financial reserves, the 'top slice' was less of an issue, although its

respondents were the most vociferous in terms of protecting accrued balances and challenging why economies of scale had not been realised.

Partnerships, through greater collaboration and the sharing of best practice, became increasingly important as the transition progressed. With new relationships developing post-conversion, there was a need for systems to be developed that reflected the shared values and principles of stakeholders. In this study, this process was hindered by the lack of an overall vision for the MAT. The MAT structure that finally emerged successfully impelled and encouraged respondents to form new relationships, whilst encouraging expertise to be shared across Trust schools. This was the common area where it was felt the MAT had added most value.

(3) What elements support a successful conversion?

Governors and Senior Leaders held differing views of what elements needed to be in place to ensure a smooth transition. For Governors, detailed and accurate documentation, including action plans, timelines, and clear 'stepping off' points were crucial. For Senior Leaders, it was more about communication: working at the interface of teachers, parents and pupils they saw the importance of getting 'buy in' and presenting a positive, consistent message. The concept of 'partnership' meant different things to both groups. The changes proposed post-conversion also revealed sharp differences in opinion. For Governors, academization was a mechanism for doing things differently. None of the areas they identified, however, were priorities for Senior Leaders who saw them as a threat to established practices. Twelve months after the conversion, not only had the suggested changes never been introduced but they were no longer even being proposed. There was a marked reluctance amongst Governors to challenge Senior Leaders in case this slowed the transition and adversely affected stakeholder relationships. This reflects another key learning point of this research project: innovation and change need to be enacted quickly or the motivation and will to do so can dissipate. It is likely that this is an issue unique to Converter Academies,

however. Sponsorship, by its very nature, is about doing things differently, and usually associated with under-performing schools where the status quo is not an option. As all of the schools in this study were rated as 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted, Senior Leaders felt more confident in pushing back against Governors and challenging their interpretation of what should be changed, what Greany and Higham (2018:98) refer to as 'passive resistance'.

Partnerships, and how stakeholders interact with each other post-conversion, need to be clarified within the scheme of delegation. Regarded as indispensable up until the point of conversion, it remains a theoretical document until the MAT is formed. Perhaps, inevitably, it was then seen as failing to incorporate and address the different issues that arose, needing an on-going review and evaluation mechanism. Having a credible lead person to drive the conversion, who also retained oversight of the whole process and could respond quickly to queries and issues, was also seen as crucial to ensuring a successful transition. This oversight was even more important considering the paucity of useful information available from government bodies to support the MAT transfer process, and the lack of transparency surrounding RSCs' decision-making powers.

(4) What elements hinder a successful conversion?

Issues of governance, finance and irreversibility were identified as hindering a successful conversion. These are all autonomy and accountability issues. Governance was a particular concern, as stakeholders had to accept they would be ceding powers to the BoD. With governance already judged positively at each of the schools, this initially threatened to derail the process before it had even started. In this study, the solution was to air concerns early, agree the representation on the BoD, and keep governance as a standing item on each working group agenda. By doing this, and coming to an agreement about future governance structures at the beginning, time was not wasted later and one of the most potentially contentious areas was sorted early. This was another finding of this research project - agree 'non-negotiables' at the

start, otherwise a lot of time and resource can be spent discussing issues where consensus might, otherwise, never be reached.

The issue of financial reserves, and how these are distributed following conversion, was another 'non-negotiable'. For schools that had amassed large reserves through, in their opinion, careful decision-making and prudence, there was a noticeable reluctance to share budgets with other schools and hand the control of reserves to the MAT. Whilst this might not be seen as in the spirit of the MAT structure, whereby all assets transfer into one entity, in this research project, the conversion would not have taken place without a legal agreement protecting each individual school's resources. Even 12 months later, with a skills-based restructured BoD in place, less representative of individual institutions, there was still no desire to pool resources: financial concerns, surrounding the LACSEG and 'top slice', emerging as new issues instead. Partnership, it appeared, had its limits when funding was involved.

The irreversibility of the decision to join a MAT, and the power and control it would exercise thereafter, was a concern for respondents across all three schools during the first two data collection points, but not the deal breaker that many had foreseen. This was for two reasons: political expediency and a desire to formalise and future-proof partnership working. There was also a feeling that the process had taken on a momentum that needed to be realised. For both Governors and Senior Leaders, it made sense to take advantage of the £25,000.00 conversion grant and ownership of the MAT structure. Whilst alternative school models, such as Federations, could be unpicked at a later date, and actually would have addressed many of the respondents' concerns, this was not seen as necessarily advantageous - it being felt these structures were too personality dependent and lacking in sustainability. As the three schools had previously worked together informally, the MAT structure was the next logical step in a world where local authorities were increasingly irrelevant.

**(5) 12 months after conversion, what benefits have been realised?
What issues remain and why?**

The vast majority of literature considering transition into academies and MATs ends at the point of conversion. There is an assumption that, with a new legal entity being formed, the transfer point marks the end of the journey. As a result, most on-going research focuses solely on the educational performance of academies/MATs and how this compares to their predecessor institutions. Interestingly, this research project uncovered a different story: the conversion point marks the end of one journey but the beginning of another, with many of the controversies arising post-conversion. Interpersonal, relational and emotive issues continue into the new structure where new partnerships have to be formed and new personalities gelled.

In terms of those benefits realised post-conversion, these were mainly around the concept of partnership, the utilisation of resources, professional development and sharing of best practice. All of these could have been achieved without a MAT structure, and without any changes to original governance. There were no tangible improvements in educational outcomes as a result of joining the MAT - results for all pupils and the disadvantaged - were in line with those achieved previously. Operational benefits were limited as there were few economies of scale and few cost advantages. Indeed, across all three schools, costs increased. As the key motivations for becoming an academy/joining a MAT were improved finances and greater autonomy, it is ironic that these two areas emerged as the biggest problems following conversion.

In areas such as admissions, for Schools B and C, there was greater control. This enabled LGBs to exercise more discretion over whom to admit. Even though this could destabilise local provision, respondents were mainly focused on their own schools, with little interest in institutions beyond the MAT. Not only does this point to a lack of clear vision for the MAT but it suggests the fragmentation of education, caused by academies and MATs, is undermining the ability of LAs to plan and coordinate provision for the

benefit of all children within an area. In this research project, respondents were aware of this, but it did not alter their thinking or their actions - pragmatism, rather than altruism or morality, driving actions and decision-making.

In relation to finance, another key finding of this study was the importance of treating 'due diligence' as an on-going process, rather than an isolated activity. Concerns over the reduction in LACSEG monies, and the cost and use of the 'top slice' post-conversion, could have been resolved if a cost-benefit analysis of the MAT, compared to the LA, had been made prior to transition. With schools facing unexpected reductions in budgets by joining the MAT, greater scrutiny was placed on the centralised function and it became an easy target for criticism. It appears true that, in their enthusiasm for schools joining MATs, central government has downplayed the possible negative financial implications for individual schools, but a checklist of questions to be considered at each stage of the conversion process would, at least, have enabled financial issues to remain at the forefront of stakeholders' minds. Without this, there is the likelihood of any goodwill prior to conversion evaporating quickly, as the financial realities hit home.

6.2 Retrospective Thoughts on the Chosen Methodology

If I were to do this research project again, there are several things that I would change. Firstly, I would reduce the number of respondents and spend more time on each interview. This is because I realised that, in terms of insight to the conversion process itself, this is where the majority of 'thick description' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) came from. It would also have enabled me to explore avenues, such as alternative school structures, in greater depth than the questionnaires' responses allowed. My pilot interviews offered me the opportunity to refine and hone my questions, but there was still significant overlap between the questionnaires and interviews; overlap which, if minimised, could have provided time for further exploration of respondents' backgrounds and how these impacted on decision-making. I also had

difficulty managing the volume of data with 42 questionnaires and 17 interviews at each data collection point generating an enormous amount of analysis and transcription. This could have been made easier through combining the SurveyMonkey and Excel databases. Secondly, work could have been carried out with the different categories of governor: community, parent, LA, foundation and staff to see whether these influenced the decisions reached. 'Pattern matching' could then have been employed across any familiar themes and observations that emerged to support reliability.

This study did not explore in detail, differences between primary' and secondary' phase respondents as, in the pilot programme, these were not seen as significant. In retrospect, however, this could have been a fruitful area of research, as the expectations and experiences of both sectors are not always complementary, and there was initially some unease that the larger secondary school might dominate proceedings. Thirdly, although I made the decision to treat Chairs of Governors and Headteachers differently, by obtaining consent to quote and paraphrase them directly, I would not do so again. This decision was made as a result of the pilot programme, where the insights gained from these two groups were particularly illuminating and often conflicting. Stepping back, however, I realised this was an issue unique to the context of these schools, where only a small group of people were decision-makers. Despite the insightfulness of many of the Chair of Governors and Headteachers comments, there was nothing that warranted their separation, and, at times, I felt answers were under-developed because of their awareness of direct attribution. It also meant that I had to be particularly careful that what was disclosed did not breach any confidentiality.

In terms of my role as CEO designate, and insider-researcher, I felt that I placed as many safeguards into the methodology as possible, with the explicit reflective process adopted directly addressing issues of impartiality and bias. I was pleased by the willingness of respondents to express their concerns, thoughts and feelings, often frankly, but it would be naïve to assume my position and role did not influence responses, especially those of Senior

Leaders. The irony was also not lost on me that the reasons that, as a practising Headteacher, I sought distance from the LA were the same reasons that some Senior Leaders now wanted distance from the MAT. For Smyth and Holian (2008:37), 'The tests of good research here are rather around reflections on links between theory and practice, understanding meaning and the significance and impact of constructions of meaning, making knowledge shareable and useful and relevant to practice.' I believe this research project fulfilled these 'tests'.

6.3 Limitations of This Research

Inevitably, conclusions and recommendations from this study are subject to a number of caveats. The three schools formed part of a 'convenience' sample and had a previous history of working together. As a result, there was a degree of pre-existing goodwill and understanding between participants that enabled difficulties and misunderstandings to be overcome relatively easily. As successful schools, change was less likely to be imposed, and Senior Leaders were in a strong negotiating position when it came to challenging unfamiliar practices. Similarly, Governors were conscious that keeping Senior Leaders on side was important to the success of the transfer process and were less likely to pursue initiatives that could be controversial. This may not be the case if this research were applied to sponsored academies.

Converter Academies occupy a different educational landscape to those that are sponsored. It can be challenging at times to disaggregate the literature between the two, with 'academies' often grouped together for research purposes. Where this is the case, I have tried to draw attention to it within the literature, incorporating research on sponsored academies where I feel it has a direct bearing on the research questions. The relatively short time frame of the three case studies was another limitation, as was the lack of 'voices' from the central function. In fact, the question of 'voice' was a key one. Not involving staff, pupils and parents inevitably constrained the generalisability of the findings and meant conclusions were reached solely on the observations of Governors and Senior Leaders. Issues which affect these two

groups may not necessarily be shared by other stakeholders, potentially, limiting the usefulness of some of the recommendations.

Economies of scale may only be realised after a number of years and it would be disingenuous to suggest that the MAT structure cannot lead to financial savings - it might just take time. Similarly, it is difficult to make a judgment about performance outcomes after 12 months as success, or otherwise, could be due to a range of factors related, or unrelated, to academy conversion.

There were also methodological considerations. As already documented, my role as insider-researcher may have led respondents to offer more measured and nuanced answers to some questions. Furthermore, I was conscious that I had unprecedented access to information, with respondents unlikely to refuse my request for interviews. Whilst this might lead to a fuller research picture, it could also skew the findings, as the level of response was extremely high. Similarly, I needed to constantly remind myself of the degree of pre-existing knowledge that I held when interpreting questionnaire and interview data, and that my own history as a secondary school Headteacher could influence my interpretations. In this respect, the support of my supervisor and expert peer-reviewer was crucial, in terms of shadowing interviews, commenting upon my interpretation of transcripts, and conducting an 'independent review' of my data analysis and findings. Moreover, as this study is within the interpretivist tradition, with a phenomenological underpinning, the issues of relativism and generalisation are never far away.

6.4 Original Contribution to Knowledge

This research project offers insights into issues of power and control in the operation of schools in England. Whilst traditionally played out in the struggle between national and local government, Ball (2013:147), talks of 'heterarchies' created by an unstable mix of hierarchy, absolutism and market forces. Characterised by multiplicity, overlap and divergent-but-co-existent patterns of relations, (Ball, 2013: 148), these new organizational forms draw

upon a range of state and non-state actors, all competing for control and influence. For Ball (2013), these heterarchies are external to schools and MATs, agencies of central government and the middle tier. This research project found them as likely to be internal: played out in the tensions between Boards of Directors and Local Governing Bodies, between centralised and local decision-making, and between School and MAT leaders.

Increased autonomy is frequently cited as one of the main benefits of becoming an academy and joining a MAT. It was also one of the main drivers for participants in this research project. This study found that, whilst autonomy from local government may be an outcome of academization, this is frequently replaced with similar oversight and control from the MAT. As a result, freedom and innovation are constrained, with schools within MATs often operating with less autonomy than those in the maintained sector. This is one of the many paradoxes of the academies' programme. Within the literature, discussion over where power and control sits within a MAT is usually focused on governance structures, and the importance of obtaining clarity and delineation at the different levels of responsibility. This study identified a different issue – role ambiguity and conflict between MAT and School Leaders. Issues of accountability, responsibility and value-for-money led to conflict between these two groups, with each unclear as to where their responsibilities started and ended. An important finding of this study is that obtaining clarity around the executive functions of the MAT is as important as obtaining clarity around governance.

As the MAT structure is hierarchical in design, existing research usually focuses on the Board of Directors' control and influence over Local Governing Bodies. This research project found a different concern: LGBs control of the BoD. With many responsibilities 'double hatted', and the same governors often sitting at both Local and Board level, conflicts of interest were evident. Governors with prior allegiances to particular schools were at times unduly influencing decision-making, with Senior Leaders complicit in prioritizing their own school's needs above those of the MAT's.

Conversion into the MAT is not the final point of the transfer process frequently assumed. This is another new finding. Rather, it is the end of one journey and the beginning of another. The systems and relationships post-conversion are as important as those that precede the transition. In fact, arguably, they are more important as these are the structures that will serve the new organization going forwards. This research project found Governors and Senior Leaders were frequently distracted by the complexities of the conversion process and its legal minutiae. As a result, insufficient attention was then paid to the post-conversion world and the wider aims, purposes, and aspirations of the future MAT. This then led to uncertainty around control and accountability. If clarification of these issues had been obtained earlier, many of the problems that surfaced post-conversion could have been mitigated against. Failure to do so meant there was uncertainty about what the MAT was trying to achieve and then dissatisfaction when it did not achieve it – another paradox. In this research project, the outcomes of conversion were unpredictable, despite careful planning. Whilst, it could be argued, this is true of any major change initiative, the implications of what is being rearranged – the structure and governance of state education and its irreversibility - make it more significant. Participants in this study were neither particularly enthused by the academies’ programme nor convinced of its ideology or effectiveness. This was yet another paradox. Despite this, and despite the two main drivers behind conversion – enhanced autonomy and increased funding – going unrealized, the majority still felt the decision to join a MAT was in the best interests of their school. This raises interesting questions of financial incentivization, political expediency and pragmatism.

Wilkins (2017:9) concludes that MATs, ‘are instrumental to forms of stagecraft in that they assist in bringing the gaze of government to bear upon the actions of schools that are otherwise less visible and transparent under local government management.’ This study found this to be only partially true. With multiple actors, often with contradictory agendas, now occupying the middle tier of education, fragmentation and dis-organisation are commonplace. As a result, the gaze of government is increasingly unfocused,

with academies and MATs operating in a confused educational landscape where oversight is arbitrary and existing networks fractured. This makes navigation difficult. Whilst the diminishing ability of the local authority to coordinate education provision county-wide, and to champion the needs of the most vulnerable has been well-documented, this study found that MATs do not always share the same sense of social responsibility. The MAT structure was found to be ultimately self-serving, inward looking and focused on its own needs, rather than supporting the wider community.

Through a focus on the conversion journey itself, this research project has shone a light on those factors that both facilitate and hinder the successful conversion into a MAT. Agreeing governance structures at the outset, having a clear action plan and communication strategy, identifying 'non-negotiables' early, whilst clarifying different roles and responsibilities post-conversion, were all seen as fundamental. This study has also shown that if significant change is proposed as a result of academization, this is best enacted early. In this study, and contrary to the literature, motivation and willingness to change was dissipated rather than enhanced over time. The need for ongoing 'due diligence', and a flexible scheme of delegation agreed by consensus and regularly reviewed, was also important, as was making early contact with the RSC's office to keep abreast of the national picture.

The paradox of autonomy is that it appears unachievable through current academy and MAT structures. It may be possible for schools to become truly autonomous but not within a hierarchical system where schools are judged and measured against the same outputs and performance criteria and there is no flexibility in the organisation of governance. Where accountability, power and partnerships reside may differ within a MAT structure, but the tensions are the same as within a maintained system, the very nature of autonomy being that it is bequeathed from elsewhere. It is a devolved responsibility that can be recalled at any time. Perhaps such a paradox is unavoidable and even desirable. The innovation that characterised early academy converters often led to inconsistency and failure. Consequently,

increased standardisation and control were introduced, with an inevitable impact on autonomy and independence. Paradoxically, therefore, autonomy as a key driver of the academies' programme appears no longer consistent with its reality.

6.5 Recommendations

For Policymakers

- Clarify the different governance arrangements in MATs, being explicit as to the relative powers of the BoDs and LGBs.
- Provide a list of 'due diligence' questions that need to be addressed at each stage of the conversion process.
- Provide more accurate, joined up and user-friendly information regarding the conversion process.
- Publish the criteria for how RSCs make decisions on whether or not MATs are approved.
- Publish statistics showing how many academies accessed the £25,000 MAT conversion grant but did not convert, and the reasons why.

For Governors

Pre-conversion

- Agree 'non-negotiables' early and try to resolve these.
- Agree the future governance structure and proportionate weightings.
- Appoint an experienced person(s) to lead the transition.
- Maintained schools will need more support during the conversion process so prioritise resources accordingly.
- Understand how the finances work post-conversion, including the percentage of the 'top slice'.
- Have a detailed action plan and timeline in place. Ensure there are clear 'stepping-off' points to enable schools to exit the process should they wish.

During conversion

- Do not assume the process is finished at the point of conversion. In many ways, it is just beginning.
- Clarify the role of any central team: who will be in it, how they will be appointed and what services they will provide.
- Clarify how the success of the central team will be measured and its accountability. Be explicit about this.
- Be clear about what you expect 'autonomy' to look like post-conversion.
- Do not get too absorbed in the details of conversion. Keep the post-transition bigger picture in mind.
- Ensure due diligence, especially as regards financial matters, is kept under regular review.

Post-conversion

- Ensure there are frequent opportunities for all stakeholders to review progress towards agreed objectives.
- Benchmark regularly against the MAT development plan.
- Review the scheme of delegation, as it is now a 'live' rather than 'theoretical' document.
- Understand how the finances work and keep these under regular review.
- Ensure there are clear communication channels between the BoD and LGBs.
- Where roles are 'double-hatted', remind BoD members to act in the best interests of all the pupils in the MAT. Provide training, as appropriate.

For Senior Leaders

Pre-conversion

- Clarify the educational benefits to your school that you wish to see through becoming an academy (if applicable) and joining a MAT.

- Agree 'non-negotiables' and try to resolve these.
- Agree who you think would be best to lead the transition.
- Discuss and agree the percentage of the 'top slice' and how you want it spent.

During conversion

- Develop a strategy for communicating with stakeholders and feeding any comments back to the steering committees.
- Be clear about the central services that you want the MAT to provide as part of the 'top slice' and the role of the central team.
- Be involved in the design of the scheme of delegation.
- Understand how the finances work.
- Accept that you will lose some autonomy as part of a MAT but be clear about how autonomy should look post-conversion.
- Clarify, with fellow Senior Leaders, what school improvement activities you want to do differently as part of a MAT.
- Do not get too absorbed in the details of the conversion. Keep the post-conversion bigger picture in mind.
- Do not assume the process is finished at the point of conversion. In many ways, this is just the beginning and there will be changes to admissions, governance, finance and HR at local level.

Post-conversion

- Establish a mechanism whereby feedback can be offered to the centralised team.
- Be involved in reviewing of the scheme of delegation. Ensure this is a termly exercise.
- Understand how the finances work and keep these under regular review.
- Remember there will be lots of ongoing change. Ensure there are enough resources at local level to cope with this.

- Maximise the opportunities to collaborate, share and work with others across the Trust.

6.6 Future Research Possibilities

For Eyles and Machin (2015:10), 'on academies themselves, there remains very little rigorous research work.' This study is a small-scale contribution towards a deeper understanding of the process of MAT transition, and the later implications and repercussions for those schools converting into one legal entity. Whilst the data presented in this research project provides some answers, it also offers up new areas worthy of further consideration. The first is whether the prior experiences of Governors and Senior Leaders influence their decision-making as to whether to become an academy and/or join a MAT and, if they do, what these experiences are. This is an important question, bearing in mind that the type of school had less significance than the motivations of those working within it. Related to this is whether the priorities of Governors and Senior Leaders, from primary and secondary phases, differ significantly. Insights from this question might also help explain why the numbers of academies and MATs in the primary sector are so much lower than the equivalent number in the secondary sector.

Questions around value-for-money also need further exploration. Whether the MAT structure offers value, compared to previous local-authority arrangements, the role of centralised teams and how they are held accountable, coupled with the changing identities and skills of Headteachers, within a MAT structure, are all pertinent areas for future research. In addition, there are wider questions as to whether the proliferation of MATs in some areas has reduced the local offer for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, and whether there are mechanisms that can be put in place early to minimise issues that surface post-conversion. On a more prosaic level, it would be interesting to know how many academies initially embarked on the MAT journey but failed to complete it, and the reasons why. Even though no government statistics are kept on this, it would be possible to calculate by looking at the number of £25,000.00 conversion grants awarded against the

number of MATs established. This could then shed interesting light on the conversion process itself and what might need to be changed.

6.7 Final Thoughts: The Paradox of Autonomy

*Given the amount of negative press that MATs receive, for there to be so many schools willing to tie their futures to a Trust suggests that they must be doing something right.
(Beaumont et al., 2019:11)*

This study has examined the many paradoxes of the academy programme, focused through the lens of autonomy. It has considered the wider political landscape within which academies and MATs operate, and the decisions that those in charge of our schools weigh up when deciding whether to make significant structural change. It has shown that the original motivations for change are not always realised, and that many of the benefits accrued could be achieved through different organisational models. By focusing on three different stages of transition, this research project has also explored how benefits, concerns, fears and influences fluctuate and change throughout the conversion process, and how the influence of particular groups can stimulate, and discourage, innovation. This research project has shown that many of the widely promoted 'freedoms' of academy status are not new and, more importantly, rarely utilised. It has also shown that, paradoxically, many of the key attractions of the academies' programme, such as greater autonomy and enhanced funding, can be hindered by the very structures intended to promote them.

The decision to join a MAT is probably the biggest decision Governors and Senior Leaders will ever make. It is also irreversible. By looking at the benefits and pitfalls, alongside those factors that both facilitate and hinder the conversion process, it is hoped that this study will enable those considering transfer into a MAT to evaluate their decisions more carefully. It also offers recommendations for areas to be explored, and questions to be answered, at different points of the journey. For me, the two most significant issues that emerged both followed the transition into the MAT. The first was the

revelation that the majority of problems surfaced not before, or at the point of conversion, but 12 months later, and the second was the role, power and influence of the central team and their interactions with School Leaders. Both were autonomy and accountability issues.

Despite reservations, the vast majority of respondents still felt the decision to become an academy/join a MAT was the right one. Initially, this appeared an incongruous finding and another paradox. Issues of political expediency, a desire to control events, rather than be controlled by them, and access to future sponsorship, were particularly influential. At heart, these were pragmatic reasons. Coupled with this, was a desire to be at the forefront of educational change. When it comes to educational research, Finch et al. (2016:12) memorably talks of the 'black box of academies and academy chains'. As the black box is a device whose internal workings are hidden, and not necessarily understood, this is an appropriate analogy. What this study has tried to do is lift its lid and gain some knowledge and understanding of the inner workings and complexities.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: New Schools Network 'types of school' document.

Appendix B: Information sheet for participants.

Appendix C: Ethical statement.

Appendix D: 'Waiver'.

Appendix E: Questionnaires.

Appendix F: Interview questions.

Appendix G: Examples of journal entries.

Appendix H: List of themes and sub-categories coding.

Appendix A: New Schools Network 'Types of School' Document

A comparison of different types of school. A 2015 guide to schools in England by the New Schools Network.

	Free Schools	Academies	Maintained	Independent
Curriculum				
Content	Exempt from following National Curriculum. Must teach certain subjects including maths, English and science. Must be 'broad and balanced' in curriculum.	Exempt from following National Curriculum. Must teach certain subjects including maths, English and science. Must be 'broad and balanced' in curriculum.	Must follow National Curriculum. Can focus on specific subjects as long as National Curriculum requirements are still met.	Exempt from following National Curriculum. Must give 'pupils experience in linguistic, mathematical, scientific, technological, human and social, physical and aesthetic and creative education.
Assessments	Required to assess students in accordance with their funding agreement – including at key stages 2 and 4.	Required to assess students at all key stages in accordance with their funding agreement.	Students must be assessed at all key stages.	Not required to perform national assessments (e.g. GCSEs). However most do.
Teaching Hours	Free to change day and term lengths.	Free to change day and term lengths.	Voluntary controlled and community schools must go through a lengthy consultation process to change school day.	Free to change day and term lengths.
Specialised Programs	Must establish a clear Special Educational Needs (SEN) policy following the code of practice for SEN and vulnerable children.	Must establish a clear SEN policy following the code of practice for SEN and vulnerable children.	Must follow the code of practice. LA oversees provision.	Must ensure that facilities and access are suitable for those with Special Educational Needs and disabilities.

Outcome Indicators	Student outcomes monitored through inspection by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education). Must reach national floor targets.	Student outcomes monitored through inspection by Ofsted.	Student outcomes monitored through inspection by Ofsted. Must meet national floor targets.	No mandatory inspection requirements for achievements. No external targets set.
Students				
Restrictions on age-range of school	Anything between the 5 – 19 age range.	Anything between the 5 – 19 age range.	Depends on LA.	None.
Admissions	No selection by aptitude permitted. Priority by faith limited to 50% of pupils. Can prioritise up to 10% of secondary pupils on aptitude.	No selection by aptitude permitted. Can prioritise up to 10% of secondary pupils on aptitude.	Selection by ability allowed for grammar schools but no other schools. Can prioritise up to 10% of secondary pupils on aptitude.	Selection by ability permitted.
Cap on number of students	Primary – classes limited to 30 pupils by statute. Secondary – None.	Primary – classes limited to 30 pupils by statute. Secondary – None.	Primary – classes limited to 30 pupils by statute. Secondary – None. Other – None.	Primary – None. Secondary – None. Other – None.

Finance				
Source of revenue and disbursement	Public – funding disbursed directly by formula calculated by the DfE. Funding varies between LAs.	Public – funding disbursed directly by formula calculated by the DfE. Funding varies between LAs. Often have additional funding from the academy sponsor.	Public – funding disbursed by LA.	Private: Fees and bequests – no public funds committed.
Revenue per pupil	Comparable to state schools in the local area.	Comparable to state schools in the local area.	Varies significantly by Local Authority.	Variable – dependent on level of fees charged.
Allocation	Schools have full flexibility to allocate funds as deemed fit, including services normally provided by LA.	Schools have full flexibility to allocate funds as deemed fit, including services normally provided by LA.	Schools free to allocate all funds received but LA keeps a proportion back for ‘central services’.	Schools have full flexibility to allocate funds as deemed fit.
Personnel Management				
Teacher selection criteria	Not required to have teachers with QTS (except SENCO) but are required to have a training and development plan.	QTS required.	QTS required.	No QTS required.
Adding non-teaching positions	Free to hire as required.	Free to hire as required.	Depends on school type.	Free to hire as required.
Performance management	Free to evaluate and manage performance as required.	Free to evaluate and manage performance as required (subject to TUPE restrictions).	Performed by LA.	Free to evaluate and manage performance as required.

Governance				
Ownership of physical assets	Charitable trusts (must be non-profit, but within that could include charities, parent/teacher groups, universities etc).	Charitable trusts.	LA for community schools. Other types, the land and buildings may be owned by a charity, religious group or governing body.	Private. Usually, but not always, a trust.
Decision-making and fiscal responsibility	Trustees/ Governing body.	Trustees/ Governing body.	Governing body (and LA).	School Governors/ Trustees.
Involvement of private sector	Able to subcontract elements of the running and management of the school to other private sector organisations.	Able to subcontract elements of the running and management of the school to other private sector organisations.	Able to subcontract elements of the running and management of the school to other private sector organisations.	Can be fully or partially privately operated.
Accountability				
Reporting requirements	Analysis and monitoring performed by DfE and Ofsted.		Monitored and analysed by LA and Ofsted (with some DfE requirements too).	No public reporting requirements.
Public Transparency	All results made publicly available.	All results made publicly available.	All results made publicly available.	Ofsted reports publicly available (most also publish exam results).

(From: New Schools Network, Comparison of different types of school. A guide to schools in England. (NSN, 2015:6-10).

Appendix B: Information Sheet for Participants

Information sheet for participants

Title

A research project investigating the journey of three standalone schools into a multi-academy trust (MAT).

Introduction

I would like to invite you to participate in this project which is looking at the reasons for successful schools deciding to join together in a multi-academy trust and the opportunities and challenges this process brings.

Why am I doing this project?

The purpose of this project is to better understand those factors that encourage successful schools to join together within a multi-academy trust. From the perspectives of Governors and Senior Leaders, it aims to identify the original motivations and drivers, those elements that smooth or hinder a successful transition, and whether or not the perceived benefits are realised in reality. The project will study three schools at three different stages: the beginning of the conversion journey, the point of conversion and 12 months after the transition. It is hoped that the information from this study will improve the decision-making process for those schools considering joining or forming a MAT.

Why have I been invited to take part?

The project involves administering a questionnaire and interviewing key personnel involved at the different stages of the MAT conversion process. You have been invited as, I believe, you will have particularly useful insights into the process.

Do I have to take part?

No, your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. You are not obliged to take part and, if you do not wish to, there is no need to give a reason and you will not be contacted again. Similarly, if you do agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without explanation.

What will happen if I take part?

A questionnaire will be sent via SurveyMonkey three times over a two-year period: September 2016, September 2017 and September 2018. Completing each questionnaire should take around 30 minutes.

We will arrange to meet at a time convenient for you, and there will be three interviews with myself over this two-year period. Each interview should last no longer than 40 minutes.

When I have completed the study, I will produce a summary of the findings which I will send to you. I will also provide a verbal de-brief of the project's findings.

What are the advantages of taking part?

You may find the project interesting and enjoy the opportunity to reflect on decisions made and the motivation and rationale behind these. You may find the reflective process and findings useful when other schools apply to join the multi-academy trust.

What are the disadvantages of taking part?

It could be that you are not comfortable in explaining the reasons why particular decisions were taken.

Will I receive any payment or monetary benefits?

You will receive no payment for your participation. The data will not be used for commercial purposes. Therefore, you should not expect any royalties or payment from the research project in the future.

Will my taking part in this project remain confidential?

Yes. If you do agree to take part, the information will not be disclosed to any other party. Your responses to the questions will be used for the purpose of this project only and remain confidential unless a different arrangement has been expressly agreed between us. You will not be named at any point in the study and the schools will be anonymised. GDPR regulations will be followed as to the handling, processing and storage of data. More information can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulations> or please use the email address at the end of this information sheet for any queries.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of the study will be used to improve the process of conversion for schools that are considering joining a multi-academy trust. This is by better understanding the motivations and concerns around joining, and the enabling and inhibiting factors that Governors and Senior Leaders experience. By involving a range of stakeholders in this project, it is also hoped that any new benefits/disadvantages following conversion will be identified.

Who should I contact for further information?

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have these questions answered by me before, during, or after the research.

Please contact Peter Barnes, Principal Researcher, on (07801) 908792 or email p.barnes@warwick.ac.uk if you have any queries or require any further information about this study.

What if I have a complaint?

Should you have any complaints relating to a study conducted at the University, or by University's employees or students, the complainant should be advised to contact the Deputy Registrar at: DeputyAcademicRegistrarPA@warwick.ac.uk or look at:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/rss/researchgovernance/complaints_procedure

Furthermore, if at any time you feel uncomfortable during the research process and wish to talk to someone independent of the study, please email Trevor Barrowsmith at: tbarrowsmith@independentconsulting.co.uk

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research.

Peter Barnes

Appendix C: Ethical Statement

ETHICAL STATEMENT

Below is a copy of the Study's Ethical Statement. It was drawn up at the start of the first pilot case study. This Ethical Statement guided my practice in all three case studies.

From my perspective as researcher, I suggest that I have a number of responsibilities and rights with respect to the research participants involved in this study. I recognise that the nature and implications of these responsibilities and rights need to be negotiated and agreed with all research participants.

RESEARCHER'S RESPONSIBILITIES	ACTIONS WITH RESPECT TO PARTICIPANTS	ACTIONS WITH RESPECT TO CHAIRS OF GOVERNORS/ HEADTEACHERS
1. CONFIDENTIALITY		
(a) Access to the raw data will be confined to the researcher, academic supervisor and expert peer-reviewer.	Confirmed through ethical statement and information sheet describing project.	Confirmed through ethical statement and information sheet describing project.
(b) Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and schools in the study.	Confirmed through ethical statement and information sheet describing project.	Confirmed through ethical statement and information sheet describing project.
(c) Participants will be informed of the limits of the above measures.	Issues of possible harm discussed in pre-interview.	Chairs of Governors/ Headteachers agreed to waiver anonymity. Signed waiver needed.
(d) All questionnaires and interviews will be considered as data sources.	At each issuing of the questionnaire and during pre-interview discussion this is made clear.	At each issuing of the questionnaire and during pre-interview discussion this is made clear.
2. INFORMATION PROVISION		
Participants will be informed of the purposes, scope and possible outcomes of the project.	Information sheet provided at beginning of project and re-issued before each data collection point.	Information sheet provided at beginning of project and re-issued before each data collection point.
Participants informed of the role of the researcher.	Role of the researcher and how conflicts can be avoided provided in the information sheet.	Role of the researcher and how conflicts can be avoided provided in the information sheet.
Participants informed of the right to withdraw at any time without sanction.	Informed at start of project in information sheet and ethical statement. Repeated at the beginning of each data collection point.	Informed at start of project in information sheet and ethical statement. Repeated at the beginning of each data collection point.

1. NEGOTIATION		
(a) Opportunities will be provided for participants to negotiate with the researcher about the processes of the research. Participants will be made aware of the likely time commitments.	Discussed with the participants at the beginning of the research. Information sheet/ethical statement provided. Discussions prior to each set of data collection. Participants clear about time parameters at beginning of study.	Discussed with the participants at the beginning of the research. Information sheet/ethical statement provided. Discussions prior to each set of data collection. Participants clear about time parameters at beginning of study.
(b) Opportunities, where practicable, will be provided to read transcripts of interviews and revise/amend them if factual errors/misunderstanding of meanings.	Participants given the option to read interview transcripts offered at beginning of each interview.	Transcripts sent to all Chairs of Governors/ Headteachers automatically as higher risk of identification.
(c) Opportunities, where practicable, will be provided to read the final report.	Final draft report shared with participants prior to publication.	Final draft report shared with participants prior to publication.
2. RELATIONSHIP MONITORING		
(a) The issue of the relationship between the researcher and the participants discussed at the outset of the research.	Presentation at the beginning of the project to all 3 Governing Bodies clearly outlining researcher's position.	Presentation at the beginning of the project to all 3 Governing Bodies clearly outlining researcher's position.
(b) The research process will include a deliberate element of researcher-participant relationship monitoring by the expert peer-reviewer.	Anonymised raw data scrutinised by supervisor. A selection of pilot interviews observed by expert peer-reviewer.	Anonymised raw data scrutinised by supervisor. A selection of pilot interviews observed by expert peer-reviewer.
3. SUPPORTIVENESS		
(a) The researcher will seek to support and never criticize or hinder the research participants and their actions and contexts.	Opportunity provided on information sheet for any concerns to be raised with independent complaints officer.	Opportunity provided on information sheet for any concerns to be raised with independent complaints officer.
(b) The researcher will explore with the research participants ways in which the research process can be of meaningful benefit to them.	Discussed during briefing at the beginning of the process. Opportunity to share thoughts provided at start of each set of interviews. Researcher accessible to participants at all times.	Discussed during briefing at beginning of process. Opportunity to share thoughts provided at start of each set of interviews. Researcher accessible to participants at all times.

RESEARCHER'S RIGHTS	ACTIONS WITH RESPECT TO PARTICIPANTS	ACTIONS WITH RESPECT TO CHAIRS OF GOVERNORS/ HEADTEACHERS
1. INTERPRETATION		
(a) The researcher reserves the right to interpret the results using empirical evidence to support findings.	Made clear on the information sheet.	Made clear on the information sheet.
(b) Where differences occur between the researcher and a participant over interpretations, the researcher will maintain his interpretation unless it is inaccurate/harmful to the participant.	Draft research findings shared with participants.	Draft research findings shared with participants.

1. INFORMATION PROTECTION		
(a) The researcher reserves the right to withhold access by research participants to data concerning other informants. GDPR regulations will be followed at all times.	Made clear on the information sheet/ethical statement.	Made clear on the information sheet. Waiver obtained from all Chairs of Governors/Headteachers.
2. RIGHT TO PUBLISH		
(a) The researcher reserves the right to publish the final report.	Final draft findings shared and discussed with participants.	Final draft findings shared and discussed with participants.
3. ALTERATION OF RESEARCH FOCUS		
(a) The researcher reserves the right to negotiate a change in the research focus in response to observed events and/or interactions.	Made clear on the information sheet.	Made clear on the information sheet.

Appendix D: 'Waiver'.

WAIVER

I hereby confirm that I have read the comments directly attributed to me within this research project, confirm they are accurate and give my consent for them to be included. No further publication, outside of this thesis, shall take place without my express permission.

Signed:

Position:

Date:

Counter-signed:

Position:

Date:

Appendix E: Questionnaires

**EVALUATION OF PROCESSES AND
PROCEDURES FOR A SCHOOL
BECOMING AN ACADEMY (IF
APPLICABLE) AND JOINING A
MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST**

QUESTIONNAIRE 1 of 3
(DATA COLLECTION POINT 1)

GOVERNORS' AND SENIOR LEADERS' VERSION – QUESTIONNAIRE 1 of 3

(Data collection point 1)

(Please answer all questions. Responses are confidential. This questionnaire relates to the preliminary discussions prior to the school converting to an academy and joining a multi-academy trust).

.....

1. What are the key drivers/motivators for becoming an academy (if applicable) and joining a multi-academy trust (MAT)?
 (Please tick all those that apply and indicate top 3 in order of preference)

	✓	Top 3	Comments
Raising educational standards			
Greater autonomy			
Government policy			
Increased funding			
Freedom from the Local Authority			
Economies of scale			
Logical next step			
Other (please specify):			

2. What do you think are the government's main reasons for promoting academies and MATs?
 (Please tick all those that apply and indicate top 3 in order of preference)

	✓	Top 3	Comments
Improving outcomes for pupils			
Encouraging schools to innovate			
Sidelining of Local Authorities			
Breaking up National Pay and Conditions			
Allowing Teachers and School Leaders to be in control			
Increasing choice and diversity for Parents			
Other (please specify):			

3. Did you consider these other forms of school organisation and, if so, why did you decide against them?

(Please tick and comment as appropriate)

	Yes	No	Comments
Hard federation			
Soft federation			
Umbrella trust			
Informal/loose collaboration			
Other (please specify):			
I did not consider these other forms of organisation			

4. Do you have any initial concerns about becoming an academy (if applicable) and joining a MAT?

(If so, please tick all that apply and indicate top 3 in order of preference)

	✓	Top 3	Comments
Losing individual school identity			
Losing 'local' control			
Losing Local Authority support			
Expense of conversion			
Changes of governance			
I do not have any concerns			
Other (please specify):			

Continued -->

5. What changes are you planning to put in place following conversion to an academy (if applicable) and joining a MAT?

(Please tick yes or no and indicate top 3 in order of preference)

	Yes	No	Top 3	Comments
Procuring services that were previously provided by the LA				
Changing the curriculum offered				
Collaborating with other schools in more formalised partnerships				
Changing pattern of capital expenditure				
Increasing the numbers of pupils on roll				
Introducing savings in back office functions (such as HR, ICT etc.)				
Changing staff pay structures				
Reconstituting Governing Body				
Adding non-teaching positions				
Changing the performance management systems for teachers				
Introducing or increasing revenue-generating activities				
Changing school leadership				
Changing your Admissions criteria				
Hiring teachers without QTS				
Seeking to attract pupils from a different geographical area				
Increasing length of school day				
Changing the length of the school terms				
Reducing the number of pupils on roll				

6. Do you consider the academies' programme evolutionary, revolutionary or neither?

(Please tick as applicable)

Evolutionary

Revolutionary

Neither

Comments:

7. What do you see as the educational benefits, if any, of becoming an academy (if applicable) and joining a MAT?

(Please tick all those that apply and indicate top 3 in order of preference)

	✓	Top 3	Comments
Improved outcomes for all pupils			
Improved outcomes for disadvantaged pupils			
Shared expertise and resource			
Ability to focus on the core business of teaching and learning			
Professional development of staff			
I do not perceive any benefits			
Other (please specify):			

8. Are you clear about the roles and responsibilities of the following bodies?

	Very Clear	Reasonably Clear	Unclear
ESFA			
OFSTED			
Local Authority			
Regional Schools Commissioner			
Teaching Schools			
DfE			
New Schools Network			
Comments:			

EVALUATION OF PROCESSES AND
PROCEDURES FOR A SCHOOL
BECOMING AN ACADEMY (IF
APPLICABLE) AND UNDERGOING
THE CONVERSION INTO A MULTI-
ACADEMY TRUST

QUESTIONNAIRE 2 of 3
(DATA COLLECTION POINT 2)

GOVERNORS' AND SENIOR LEADERS' VERSION – QUESTIONNAIRE 2 of 3

(Data collection point 2)

(Please answer all questions. Responses are confidential. This questionnaire relates to the three-term process of converting into an academy (if applicable) and joining a multi-academy trust).

.....

1. Are any of your initial concerns about becoming an academy/joining a multi-academy trust (MAT) still relevant?

(If so, please tick all that apply and indicate whether or not alleviated)

	✓	Alleviated		Comments
		(Yes)	(No)	
Losing individual school identity				
Losing 'local' control				
Losing Local Authority support				
Expense of conversion				
Changes to Governance				
I did not have any concerns				
Other (please specify):				

2. Did any new concerns arise?

(If yes, please tick and comment below)

	✓	Comments
New concern		
No new concern		

3. What elements hindered successful conversion into the MAT?

Comments:

4. What changes are you looking to put in place following conversion/within the next 12 months?

(Please yes or no and indicate top 3 in order of preference)

	Yes	No	Top 3	Comments
Procuring services that were previously provided by the LA				
Changing the curriculum offered				
Collaborating with other schools in more formalised partnerships				
Changing your pattern of capital expenditure				
Increasing the numbers of pupils on roll				
Introducing savings in back office functions (such as HR, ICT etc.)				
Changing staff pay structures				
Reconstituting Governing Body				
Adding non-teaching positions				
Changing the performance management systems for teachers				
Introducing or increasing revenue-generating activities				
Changing school leadership				
Changing your Admission Criteria				
Hiring teachers without QTS				
Seeking to attract pupils from a different geographical area				
Increasing length of school day				
Changing the length of the school terms				
Reducing the number of pupils on roll				

5. Of the educational benefits identified at the beginning of converting into an academy/joining a MAT, which are you looking to realise?

(Please tick all those that apply and indicate top 3 in order of preference)

	✓	Top 3	Comments
Improved outcomes for all pupils			
Improved outcomes for disadvantaged pupils			
Shared expertise and resources			
Ability to focus on the core business of teaching and learning			
Professional development of staff			
I am not expecting to see any benefits			
Other (please specify):			

6. What elements support successful transition into a MAT?

(Please tick all those that apply and indicate top 5 in order of preference, where 1 is high and 5 is low)

	✓	Top 5	Comments
Shared vision and aims of MAT			
Detailed timeline and action plan			
Agreed 'non-negotiables' early			
Working group that meets regularly			
Draft documentation produced early for comment			
Support from other agencies			
Effective communication and feedback during conversion process			
Prior relationship and trust between parties			
Clear 'stepping off' points			
Other (please specify):			

7. Are those factors that originally made this MAT an attractive option still important?

(If so, please tick all those that apply and comment as appropriate)

	✓	Comments
Educational vision and philosophy		
Devolution of decision-making proposal		
Sharing Services		
Sharing Personnel		
Pre-existing relationships		
Other (please specify):		

8. What documentation was most useful during the conversion process?

(Please tick all those that apply and indicate top 3 in order of preference)

	✓	Top 3	Comments
Timeline/action plan			
Academies Financial Handbook			
MAT development plan			
Scheme of Delegation			
Articles of Association			
Memorandum of Understanding			
Funding Agreement			

Continued -->

9. How would you rate the support of the following organisations during the conversion process?

(Please tick and comment as appropriate)

	Helpful	Reasonably Helpful	Unhelpful	Comments
ESFA				
OFSTED				
Local Authority				
Regional Schools Commissioner				
Teaching Schools				
DfE				
New Schools Network				

10. During the final sign off meeting, did you feel that you had all the necessary information to make an informed decision about whether or not to convert?

(Please tick and comment as appropriate)

Yes

No

Comments:

EVALUATION OF PROCESSES AND
PROCEDURES FOR A SCHOOL
BECOMING AN ACADEMY (IF
APPLICABLE) AND UNDERGOING
THE CONVERSION INTO A MULTI-
ACADEMY TRUST

QUESTIONNAIRE 3 of 3
(DATA COLLECTION POINT 3)

GOVERNORS' AND SENIOR LEADERS' VERSION – QUESTIONNAIRE 3 of 3

(Data collection point 3)

(Please answer all questions. Responses are confidential. This questionnaire relates to the 12 months following conversion to an academy (if applicable) and joining the multi-academy trust.)

.....

1. Have your original key motivations/drivers for becoming an academy (if applicable) and joining a multi-academy trust (MAT) now been realised?
(If so, please tick all those that apply and comment as appropriate)

	✓	Comments
Raised educational standards		
Increased funding		
Greater autonomy		
Freedom from Local Authority control		
Economies of scale		
Other (please specify):		

2. Are any of your initial concerns about becoming an academy/joining a MAT still relevant?
(If so, please tick all those that apply, and indicate whether or not alleviated)

	✓	Alleviated		Comments
		(Yes)	(No)	
Losing individual school identity				
Losing 'local' control				
Losing Local Authority support				
Expense of conversion				
Changes to Governance				
I did not have any concerns				
Other (please specify):				

3. What changes have you put in place/are you planning to put in place since the conversion to an academy (if applicable) and joining a MAT?

(Please tick all those that apply and indicate top 3 in order of preference)

	Yes	No	Top 3	Comments
Procured/procuring services that were previously provided by the LA				
Changed/changing the curriculum offered				
Collaborated/collaborating with other schools in more formalised partnerships				
Changed/changing your pattern of capital expenditure				
Increased/increasing the numbers of pupils on roll				
Introduced/introducing savings in back office functions (e.g. HR, ICT etc.)				
Changed/changing staff pay structures				
Reconstituted/reconstituting Governing Body				
Added/adding non-teaching positions				
Changed/changing the performance management systems for teachers				
Increased/increasing revenue-generating activities				
Changed/changing school leadership				
Changed/changing your Admissions Criteria				
Hired/hiring teachers without QTS				
Seeking to attract/attracting pupils from a different geographical area				
Increased/increasing length of school day				
Changed/changing the length of the school terms				
Reduced/reducing the number of pupils on roll				

4. What educational benefits have been realised since becoming an academy (if applicable) and joining a MAT?

(Please tick all those that apply and indicate top 3 in order of preference)

	✓	Top 3	Comments
Improved outcomes for all pupils			
Improved outcomes for disadvantaged pupils			
Shared expertise and resources			
Ability to focus on the core business of teaching and learning			
Professional development of staff			
No benefits have been realised			
Other (please specify):			

5. Have any new concerns arisen over the last 12 months?

(Please tick and comment as appropriate)

Yes

No

Comments:

6. Do you feel that there has been more independence/autonomy in terms of decision-making?

(Please tick and comment as appropriate)

Yes

No

Partly

Comments:

7. What documentation have you found most useful post-conversion?
(Please tick all those that apply and indicate top 3 in order of preference)

	✓	Top 3	Comments
Timeline/Action plan			
Academies Financial Handbook			
MAT development plan			
Scheme of Delegation			
Articles of Association			
Memorandum of Understanding			
Funding Agreement			

8. Do you feel that any of the government's main justifications for promoting academies have been realised in practice?
(Please tick all those that apply and indicate top 3 in order of preference)

	✓	Top 3	Comments
Improving outcomes for pupils			
Encouraging schools to innovate			
Sidelining of Local Authorities			
Breaking up of National Pay and Conditions			
Allowing Teachers and School Leaders to be in control			
Increasing choice and diversity for Parents			
Other (please specify):			

Continued -->

9. Knowing what you know now, what areas (if any), would you request further clarification on before deciding to convert?

(Please tick and comment as appropriate)

	✓	Comments
Governance structure		
'Top slice'/Allocating funds		
Autonomy		
Scheme of Delegation		
Role of Central Team		
Other (please specify):		

10. In your opinion, what has been the biggest benefit of academy conversion?

Comments:

What has been the biggest drawback?

Comments:

Knowing what you know now, do you think the decision to convert was still in the best interests of your school? (Please tick and comment as appropriate)

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Comments:

Appendix F: Interview Questions
INTERVIEWS - Data Collection Point 1.

Question prompts for Governors and Senior Leaders

(Read disclaimer statement - purposes of study, right to withdraw at any time, right not to answer any questions, use data will be put to, confidentiality etc.)

- (1) Can you tell me some background to your role as a Governor/Senior Leader? (How long have you been doing the role; responsibilities and motivations etc).
- (2) What are your main motivations behind thinking of becoming an academy/joining a multi-academy trust? Were there any other catalysts? What are you hoping to get out of it?
- (3) Do you have any concerns about joining a multi-academy trust and, if so, could you explain to me what they are?
- (4) Are there any things that you would regard as 'non-negotiables' or red lines in the sand?
- (5) Do you think that coming from a maintained/foundation/academy background (delete as applicable) has influenced your decision-making in any way?
- (6) Knowing what you do of the academies' programme so far, do you see it as 'evolutionary' or 'revolutionary' in terms of what it is trying to achieve? Are there other school structures that you have considered?
- (7) One of the main reasons schools are encouraged to become academies/join multi-academy trusts is to become more autonomous and independent. Is this a motivation for you? If so, how would this look? How would it be different from what you have now?
- (8) Are there things you are looking to change when you become an academy/join a multi-academy trust? (*admissions; length of school day; performance management; pay etc.*)
- (9) Do you feel that you have a good understanding of how governance operates in an academy/multi-academy trust at this early stage?
- (10) As the journey towards becoming a MAT begins, what would be most useful to you in terms of documentation/information over the next 12 months? How is this best provided?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Have you any questions for me?

INTERVIEWS - Data Collection Point 2.

Question prompts for Governors and Senior Leaders

(Read disclaimer statement - purposes of study, right to withdraw at any time, right not to answer any questions, use data will be put to, confidentiality etc.)

(1) Can you outline/explain what has worked well over the last 12 months and any reasons for this?

(2) Can you outline/explain what has worked less well over the last 12 months and any reasons for this?

(3) How have your experiences of the transfer process so far affected your thinking on whether to form a MAT?

(4) At this point of transition to an academy/into a MAT, do you feel the original drivers and motivations for conversion are still relevant? Has anything arose that you were not expecting? If so, please explain.

(5) What factors do you think helped ensure a smooth transition to becoming an academy/joining a multi-academy trust? Please explain.

(6) What factors hindered this transition? Please outline.

(7) Were there any external organisations (DfE, New Schools Network, ESFA, Local Authority etc.) that were of use during the conversion? Please clarify.

(8) Are you clear about the governance structures going forwards? What 'freedoms' do you think you will have that you did not have previously? What are you proposing to change (if anything)?

(9) Do you still feel that the multi-academy trust was the best structure to achieve what you wanted? Please explain.

(10) What documentation have you found particularly helpful during the conversion process? What was useful about it? What did you find less useful?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Have you any questions for me?

INTERVIEWS - Data Collection Point 3.

Question prompts for Governors and Senior Leaders

(Read disclaimer statement - purposes of study, right to withdraw at any time, right not to answer any questions, use data will be put to, confidentiality etc.)

(1) 12 months on from the MAT conversion, what have been the benefits (if any)? What have been the downsides (if any)?

(2) Has anything emerged differently than you originally thought? If so, please can you explain?

(3) Have the original drivers/motivations for becoming an academy/joining a multi-academy trust been realised? *(Reasons/If not, why not?)*

(4) Have there been any operational changes that you have seen? If so, what are these?

(5) Have outcomes for pupils improved since becoming an academy/joining a multi-academy trust? If so, do you think there is a correlation? If so, what evidence supports this?

(6) Has there been more independence and autonomy in decision-making since becoming an academy/joining a multi-academy trust? If so, can you point to specific examples? If not, has it stayed about the same or been more restrictive?

(7) Have you been clear about the respective roles of the Board of Directors and Local Governing Bodies and the Central Function and school teams? How has this worked?

(8) Knowing what you know now, do you feel the academies' policy is more 'evolutionary' or 'revolutionary'? Please explain.

(9) Whilst hindsight might be a wonderful thing, do you still think the decision to convert was in the best interests of your school? If so, why? If not, why not?

(10) If you were advising another school, whether or not to join a multi-academy trust, what questions would you encourage them to ask? What lessons have been learned from this conversion?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Have you any questions for me?

Appendix G: Examples of Journal Entries

Examples of Journal entries

Journal entry - 15/06/16

Concerns over finance but not those reflected in the literature. Reserves and one school's extravagance supporting another school's prudence. How much of a problem will this be going forwards? Dealbreaker one claims. Is this a commonly held perception? Is there any research in this area? 'Stepping off' points viewed very positively – seen as a key component of a smooth transition but need to triangulate with other respondents. Governors and Senior Leaders very different views on what is necessary for successful conversion - latter more communication focused. Importance of interpersonal cannot be understated. High degree of existing trust. No enthusiasm for federation model - needs further exploration. Each person interviewed sees autonomy differently - needs bottoming out.

Journal entry - 21/07/17

Enthusiasm around what the MAT can offer in terms of school improvement. Networking, shared professional development, learning across different key stages. Opportunities for cross-phase development seen as a positive. Some concerns how shared CPD priorities will be identified - further exploration necessary. Also, how MAT can drive school improvement? Need some questions around this and to cross-reference with other Senior Leaders. Real opportunity but will it be grasped? Compare with research of Greany (2018).

Journal entry - 16/07/18

Interesting observation from Senior Leader how MAT structure is constraining autonomy. Feels too much 'one size fits all'. Does not like scrutiny from centre. Feels inappropriate and reducing discretion. Wants to know 'who challenges the centre?' Wants to know how the centre is held accountable? Feeling needs to be more scrutiny of finances and what the 'top slice' provides. None of these concerns evident 12 months earlier. Says the MAT started well but has lost direction. Not sure what it stands for and how 'added value' for pupils can be measured. Impression that understaffing at school level being compared with assumed over staffing at MAT level - issues of communication? Tension evident 'devo-max' and centre. Can this ever be adequately resolved? Needs further exploration. Could be an issue just unique to this MAT? Or does it have wider implications?

Appendix H: List of Themes and Sub-Categories Coding

EXAMPLE OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION AND CODING - Data Collection Point 1.

Int: = Interviewer

Res: = Respondent

	Coding
<p>1. Int: Can you tell me some background to your role as a Governor/Senior Leader? (How long have you been doing the role/responsibilities/motivations etc)?</p>	
<p>Res: I've been Chair of Governors for several years at this school. Prior to this I was the Chair of Governors at two primary schools taking both out of special measures. I have pretty much done every job on a Governing Body. In my day job I am an adviser specialising in primary education.</p>	
<p>2. Int: What are your main motivations behind thinking of becoming an academy/joining a multi-academy trust? What are you hoping to get out of it?</p>	
<p>Res: I don't really believe in the Academies programme. For me, it's just an attempt to force the private sector on schools. But it's the next logical step in our journey and we need the additional monies.</p>	<p><u>B/C</u> <u>N1/N2</u> <u>/N3</u> <u>B1</u></p>
<p>Int: Do you think there will be additional monies?</p>	
<p>Res: At the beginning, yes, until the bribes run out.</p>	<p><u>F1/F3</u></p>
<p>Int: Why is it the next logical step?</p>	
<p>Res: We've done everything else and developed the school at the same time. This is what the government wants and I'd rather be doing than done to. I also think it provides excellent opportunities for us to work together.</p>	<p><u>B/</u> <u>G1/G2</u> <u>/G3/F6</u></p>
<p>3. Int: Do you have any concerns about joining a multi-academy trust and if so, could you explain to me what they are?</p>	
<p>Res: Loads. I am worried about how the governance structures will work out. Who will be doing what? Working with strangers and how the Local Governing Bodies will interact with the Board of Directors. I am concerned about the consultation and how parents will view things. Will we lose what we are good at and how will the Headteacher feel working in this new structure?</p>	<p><u>E1/E2/</u> <u>A4</u></p>
<p>Int: What is it about the new structure that worries you most?</p>	

Res: I suppose whether we will have the same level of autonomy and how we can show the new way of working is beneficial for pupils.	<u>F2/A4/A1/I1</u>
4. Int: Are there any things you would regard as 'non-negotiables' or red lines in the sand?	
Res: Losing our individual identity and being ruled by another school.	<u>E1/E2/F2</u>
5. Int: Do you think that coming from a maintained/foundation/academy background (delete as appropriate) has influenced your decision-making in any way?	
Res: Well I've come from lots of different backgrounds (laughs). I suppose it means we've always been at the forefront of new initiatives which has been useful in sourcing additional funding. But it's more about the people within the Governing Body than the status of the school in my opinion.	<u>O1/O2/O3</u>
6. Int: Knowing what you do of the academies' programme so far, do you see it as 'evolutionary' or 'revolutionary' in terms of what it is trying to achieve? Are there other school structures you have considered?	
Res: Oh it's evolutionary for sure. Listen, I was around during the Grant-Maintained days of the eighties. This is just a rehash. It's about breaking up local authorities, national pay and conditions and bringing in private companies.	<u>B1/N1/N2/N3</u>
Int: Why do you think that?	
Res: It's a Tory government. That's what they always do. As regards other structures, not really, as MATs are the only ones with monies attached.	<u>H2</u>

7. Int: One of the main reasons schools are encouraged to become academies/join multi-academy trusts is to be more autonomous and independent. Is this a motivation for you? If so, how would this look? How would it be different from what you have now?	
Res: We're almost totally autonomous now in terms of finance and governance. Curriculum less so because the government controls it. I'm hoping it won't be much different from now because, if it is, we're likely to be less autonomous than before.	<u>E1/E2/A4</u>
Int: Do you think that is a particular risk associated with a MAT?	
Res: It's always a risk with any new structure regardless of whether you are in a MAT although the MAT model allows control to sit elsewhere. Good question. I'll need to think about it more.	<u>F2/J1</u>
8. Int: Are there things you are looking to change when you become an academy/join a multi-academy trust? <i>(admissions; length of school day; performance management; pay etc).</i>	
Res: Maybe performance management. The system does not really work and needs to be more thorough. I'm not against changing pay and conditions if it helps retain good staff.	<u>K1</u>
Int: What do you not like about the performance management system?	
Res: I just think we could do better. Recognise teacher's contributions more and link to outcomes' information.	<u>K1</u>
9. Int: Do you feel that you have a good understanding of how governance operates in an academy/multi-academy trust at this early stage?	
Res: I do actually. That's what worries me - we have to get it right, especially in terms of balance of powers.	<u>E1/E2</u>
Int: What do you mean?	
Res: Making sure local governing bodies are empowered and not disenfranchised or too distant from their communities.	<u>A4/E2</u>

<p>10. Int: As the journey towards becoming a MAT begins, what would be most useful to you in terms of documentation/information over the next 12 months?</p> <p>How is this best provided?</p>	
<p>Res: A clear action plan, what we are doing when and why. A timeline that enables us to reflect and consider decisions before rushing to make them. Timely documentation and a real weighing up of the pros and cons of each decision. Oh, and by email or in person.</p> <p>No questions and nothing to add. It's going to be an interesting journey.</p>	<p><u>L1/L2/L3/L4</u></p>

List of themes and sub-categories coding.

MAJOR THEMES LIST

SUB CATEGORIES LIST

(A) AUTONOMY	A1 – MAT Constraints
	A2 – Performance Measure Constraints
	A3 – Centralised Function Constraints
	A4 – Losing Identity Constraints
(B) EVOLUTION	B1 – Core Status
	B2 – 1988 ERA
	B3 – 1980 LMS
(C) REVOLUTION	C1 – 2010 Academies Act
(D) CENTRAL CONTROL	D1 - CEO
	D2 – CFO ‘Devo-Max’
(E) GOVERNANCE	E1 – Board of Directors
	E2 – Local Governing Body
(F) FINANCE	F1 - LACSEG
	F2 – Centralised Function
	F3 – Designated Schools Grant
	F4 - Reserves
	F5 – ‘Pooling’ of monies
	F6 – Economies of Scale
(G) SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT	G1 - Networking
	G2 – Professional Development
	G3 – Joint Training
	G4 – MAT-led school improvement
(H) FEDERATIONS	H1 - Performance
	H2 - Sustainability
	H3 - Advantages
	H4 - Disadvantages
(I) OUTCOMES/PERFORMANCE	I1 - Improvement
	I2 - Decline
	I3 – Improvement for disadvantaged pupils
	I4 Decline for disadvantaged pupils
	I5 – Difficulty in like-for-like comparisons
(J) INNOVATION	J1 - Curriculum
	J2 - Staffing
	J3 - Structures

(K) ACADEMY 'FREEDOMS'	K1 – Pay and conditions
	K2 - Curriculum
	K3 – Length/times of school day
	K4 – Length/time of school terms
	K5 – Outsourcing
(L) DOCUMENTATION	L1 – Scheme of Delegation
	L2 – Action plan and timeline
	L3 – Articles of Association
	L4 – Funding agreement
(M) EXTERNAL AGENCIES SUPPORT	M1 - ESFA
	M2 – New Schools Network
	M3 - DfE
	M4 - Ofsted
	M5 – Local authority
(N) PURPOSES OF ACADEMIES PROGRAMME	N1 – Breaking up national pay and conditions
	N2 – Sidelining local authority
	N3 - Privatisation
(O) BACKGROUND OF SCHOOL	O1 - Academy
	O2 - Foundation
	O3 - Maintained