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# The changing role of the headteacher in England post academisation

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## Abstract

The schooling landscape in England has changed significantly in the past decade as a result of 'academisation'. Academy schools have moved from being locally administered to being independently run, and directly funded by national government. Conversion to academy status has been encouraged by the government on the premise that headteachers are afforded more autonomy over their schools with more effective lines of accountability. Such schools are frequently grouped in Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), more recently called School Trusts, which has consequences for leadership practice. The research in this study presents the perceptions of policy impact on the role of the headteachers working within a MAT. The participants include two primary headteachers and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the trust, a role which has emerged as a leadership position over the last decade. This article shares the leaders' views on education policy trends, particularly how this has changed the central team, the MAT, and how collaboration within the trust has changed the role of the headteacher. This unique research examined a trust that has gone through that process and records the altering dynamics of a leadership team as a consequence.

## Keywords

Academy Schools; Multi Academy Trusts; MATs; School Leadership; Middle Tier; Academisation; CEO

## Link to article

<https://educationstudies.org.uk/?p=25069>

## Introduction

Since 2010, government policy in England has led to the rapid ‘academisation’ of schools. A third of primary schools are now academies with over half of all pupils in England attending them (DfE, 2020). Academies are not-for-profit companies, funded directly by central government, and can operate as two types of charitable trust, Single Academy Trusts (SATs) or Multi Academy Trusts (MATs). These changes may not only alter the governance but also the leadership structures. The move from being a state-maintained, local authority-funded to an independent, state-funded school (or group of schools), may lead to a change in the leadership structure and implementation of new systems of accountability and autonomy. Whilst there have been several studies about how the evolving landscape has affected the autonomy of schools and the changing systems of governance and accountability across the country (Greany and Higham, 2018; Simpkins *et al.*, 2019), there has been little research into the effects of these policies on leadership structures and systems or on the leaders currently working within MATs. This article reports and discusses the findings from interviews with three leaders who are currently working at different levels of management within a five-school Multi-Academy Trust. The findings from these interviews shows the implications of academisation on leadership and illustrates the changing nature of headship.

## Themes from the literature on academisation

The Academies Act (2010) signalled a radical shift in the schooling system in England (Male, 2018). By converting to academy status, schools removed themselves from the remit of Local Authority (LA) control and support, gaining

funding directly from central government. The Act also gave the Secretary of State for Education the power to convert state run schools, deemed as 'failing', to academies. In 2015 via the Education and Adoption Bill, this power was extended to enable the conversion to academies of 'coasting' schools.

Academies occupy a paradoxical space (Greany and Earley, 2017). On the one hand the process of academisation promises increased autonomy. Notably, such schools were given the freedom from LA control and, if they wished, the National Curriculum. They were given the freedom to reward and address performance as they saw fit (DoE, 2010). However, within this space, academies simultaneously remain part of the national accountability network (Ehren and Perryman, 2018) with expectations to deliver and perform in end-of-key-stage exams as well as being subject to Ofsted inspections. As part of a 'self-improving system' (Simkins *et al.*, 2019) academies are expected to exercise their newly granted 'freedoms' to deliver improved academic outcomes, particularly in closing the attainment gap between high and low performers (Greany and Earley, 2017). That such autonomy, coupled with the demands of performance, is less attractive to primary schools than to secondary schools might explain the comparatively low academy conversion rate among primary schools (Simkins *et al.*, 2019). Quality assurance may also be needed, as Gibson (2018) discovered that some of the leadership and preparation services run by MATs may be more self-serving than self-improving.

This paradoxical space may also be termed 'indentured autonomy' (Thompson *et al.*, 2021: 230). Headteachers may be lured towards academisation by promises of greater autonomy over curriculum and teaching methods, budget and staffing levels and the opportunity to raise funds for themselves. Subsequently, however, the headteachers find themselves beholden to new demands dictated by 'macro-policy levers' (Courtney, 2015). Furthermore, the control and power that the LAs onceheld, has been 'decimated' by academisation and a reduction in funding that has left them only able to offer minimal services (Male, 2018; Thompson *et al.*, 2021). Higham and Earley (2013) found that school leaders had varying perceptions on their level of autonomy, particularly on their freedom and ability to act, and that policy enabled differentiation of autonomy through inspection judgements and nationalised results. This suggests that, in order to gain the freedom to act, a school should relinquish

other freedoms promised as a selling point for academising. This article further explores this area, focusing on how leadership roles are altered by systems within a MAT, post conversion.

Rayner (2018) documented the actions and perceptions of three leaders over an 18-month period in a school contending with academisation. Viewing policies of academisation as 'radical moves... to reshape the public education service in England as a market', Rayner noted that these impacted the leaders' perceptions of policy, and their opinions on the future of the school changed throughout the period of the study (2018: 750). Moreover, school leaders did not share a consensus on whether academy status would be beneficial to the school. The headteacher believed he would manage as effectively in an LA-maintained school as in an academy. Rayner suggests further research is needed to understand the relationship between school cultures, professional identities and leaders' influence, and how these impact on leadership (Rayner, 2018).

A recurring theme in the literature is the corporatisation of educational leadership roles and the consequent changes in the role of the headteacher (Courtney, 2015). These changes include an emphasis on cross-school collaboration for self-improvement (Brown and Greany, 2018; Coldron *et al.*, 2014; Greany, 2018; Shaari and Hung, 2018; Simkins, 2015), the rise of the business leader and central agents and headteachers' refocusing on learning (Courtney, 2015; Shaari and Hung, 2018; Wood, 2017) and the autonomy of school leaders within a MAT (Gibson, 2016; Simon *et al.*, 2021; Thompson *et al.*, 2021). Collaboration between headteachers may follow as a result of the decreasing power of LAs (Gunter and McGinity, 2014), strategic use of resources within MATs (Simon *et al.*, 2021) and government policy of working towards a self-improving system (Male, 2018; Simkins *et al.*, 2019), either through voluntary or mandated academisation or financial necessity (Coldron, 2014; Shaari and Hung, 2018; Simkins, 2015). One of the notable changes to the role of the headteachers is collaboration with other headteachers in the trust to ensure self-improvement (Department for Education, 2016). Hughes' (2020: 482) investigation into the role of a CEO within a MAT states that 'headship is being recultured and reconceptualised to incorporate distinct and new practices within' MATs (2020: 490). Hughes (2020) calls for further research comparing the role of the CEO to other

leadership roles in the ‘marketplace’. Gibson (2016) points to a range of autonomy of individual headteachers within MATs, some being seen as conduits for their employers’ vision. Simon *et al.* (2021) identify that the autonomy promised to the headteacher through government policy has now in fact devolved further upward than even the CEO. This article addresses some of these issues within the context of a single MAT. The changing nature of headship and working within new structures are also explored, an area conspicuously under-researched within the primary setting.

Academisation has also led to MATs developing systems of governance and administration for their schools in the place of the LA (Simkins *et al.*, 2019): the ‘central team’. Bubb *et al.* (2019) discovered that MATs spend 44% more than LA schools on the ‘middle tier’, but this covered more than the central services (HR, IT support, safeguarding team, marketing department, maintenance), it was everything between central government and schools, including the offices of the Regional School’s Commissioners (RSCs). They also suggested that higher leadership salaries and leader-to-pupil ratio could have an impact on this relatively high spending and have asked for further scrutiny into the ‘self-righting free market environment’ (2019: 57). Similarly, Davies *et al.* (2021) found that ‘academy schools spend a higher proportion of their budgets on back office and less on teachers’ salaries’ compared to LA maintained schools, despite academisation aiming to create a more cost-effective system (2021: 140).

This article explores how the emergence of the central team has affected and influenced the role of the headteachers operating within a MAT. Leadership practice and behaviour within MATs, particularly in the primary sector, is under researched, yet is increasingly relevant to the educational leadership landscape of England. In this article, we delve into the role of the headteacher in a post-change local sense but still with the background of national, institutional change (academisation), focusing particularly on three key concepts that have emerged as a result of policy since 2010:

- The perceptions of recent and future national policy implications for the role of the headteacher working in a MAT;

- The impact of the central team on the role of the headteacher within the MAT;
- Collaboration across the leadership structure at the MAT and the impact of this on the role of the individual headteacher.

## Methods

This qualitative research explores the perceptions of leadership amongst senior leaders from a single MAT. Utilising an interpretivist approach, one of the authors, employed by the trust, carried out interviews with three other senior leaders. The author worked in a separate school from the headteacher participants but collaboratively with all three in trust-wide initiatives, including as a member of the 'school improvement team' and in internal training and monitoring exercises. As a result, this is an example of 'insider-research'. Occupying the position of a colleague of the research participants enabled access that may not otherwise be given. This facilitated an advantageous position from which to 'understand the cognitive, emotional, and/or psychological precepts of participants' (Chavez, 2008: 481). As an insider the interviewer also was able to 'possess a more profound knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field' (Chavez, 2008: 481). It is recognised that insider researchers need to pay particular attention to researcher bias arising from familiarity with the research context and participants. In attempting to guard against this bias the categories at the end of every transcription/allocation were re-read and checked, and the category given was amended, if necessary, with talking to others a key reflexive tool (Van Heugten, 2004). A thematic analysis of the results was then developed partly through 'analytic memo writing' (Saldana, 2013: 49). This formed a significant part of the analysis in the last post-research collection phase. Prior to the interviews, a professional relationship of mutual trust was built with the participants which created an environment of trust between the interviewer and the interviewees, thus allowing the participants to be more forthcoming with their responses than if they were to be interviewed by a stranger.

Three senior leaders participated in interviews, the MAT CEO (Gary) and two headteachers (Sarah and Ben). As the research was based on their current place of work, the participants were asked to give their informed and ongoing consent prior to the interviews and were assured that their personal information would remain confidential in accordance with the BERA (2018) guidelines.

A combination of pre-ordinate and responsive coding was used to reduce the data from the interviews so that the content could be analysed. Pre-ordinated codes were used to categorise positive, negative or neutral answers to those questions in the interview that elicited such responses. The majority of the coding structure was predicted to emerge from the data based upon the responses given by the participants, due to the fact that the researcher did not know what answers would have been received. A combination of the two strategies was employed for those questions in which some answers were predicted in response to the literature review and/or document search but that may also have elicited unknowns. There were, therefore, some pre-ordinated tags and some that were self-identifying throughout the coding process. The data was analysed against five key areas that were predetermined by the questions set out in the interview schedule: leadership and philosophy; perceptions of recent education policy; perceptions of the future of educational leadership in England; pros and cons of leadership in a MAT; effectiveness of participants in their current roles. From these areas four themes emerged for discussion: teaching and learning; the central team; collaboration; and the future of education leadership in England.

Contextual information is important for data analysis in case studies. The MAT at the heart of this study encompassed five schools (one secondary and four primary) and is situated within a city. Of the five schools, one was a new free school secondary, two shared a headteacher (Sarah), one had no headteacher at the time the research was carried out, and the final school's headteacher was Ben. The local area is high on the social deprivation index and in the lowest quartile for educational attainment within England. The trust is a not-for-profit organisation that receives funding directly from central government and provides central services to all of its schools. These services included HR, finance, safeguarding, marketing, IT and premises management. The trust employed a CEO at the head of these central services and the schools within the trust. Each school had its own headteacher, apart from two of the smaller primaries (a two-form and a one-form, neither of which had a Year 6 cohort), which had one headteacher leading both. The Ofsted inspections of the schools varied from the highest rating, 'Outstanding', to the lowest, 'Special Measures'. The interviews were conducted by the lead author who was also employed by the trust at the time that this research was conducted.

## Findings

### ***Theme 1: Teaching and learning***

All the participants identified that there had been noticeable changes to the role of the headteacher in academised schools, particularly in those that are now members of MATs. Their opinions had implicitly been influenced by their own experiences working in the MAT and prior employment. Their opinions on the degree of change varied.

Gary believed the role of the headteacher had not changed dramatically over the previous few years. They were still required to deliver pupil academic outcomes, frequently needing to develop their teams in order to do this. Gary did feel, though, that the responsibilities of headteachers had changed in recent years, referencing the MAT model in place at the trust: “The CEO role is one that manages the entity as a whole but then allows senior managers to deliver on what they’ve been paid to do”.

Sarah and Ben agreed that the apparent reduction in responsibilities allowed headteachers to focus more on teaching and learning. Sarah did not credit recent government policy and evolving systems of leadership. Instead, she suggested that positive trends in educational achievement were due to “a fresh wave of young people coming into these roles”. In contrast, Ben emphasised that the role was more focused on accountability for outcomes in performance tables and inspections. “Let’s address the league tables and Ofsted. The stress of the position, I think there are a lot of box-ticking exercises. It’s a numbers game and less about the individual children in your school.”

### ***Theme 2: The central team***

Sarah, Ben and Gary all acknowledged the positive impact of central services. Sarah explained that she had worked with and visited many other MATs and had seen the ‘real’ impact of academisation on the role of the headteacher. Not all trusts had central services. She said that “the biggest one (benefit) for me is having centralised services and actually being able to concentrate on what my skill set is”. She was referring to her ability to organise and manage curriculum, and teaching and learning within her

schools. She gave several examples which explained why it would be advantageous for a headteacher to work with this model in place.

I don't want to have to learn to use the apps you have to learn. I don't have to learn the ins and outs of PAT testing to ensure we meet requirements. I don't want to have to spend hours on a PC writing letters, which could be done by a HR department.

Ben was not confident about the non-educational aspects of his role. He too appreciated the support that was given to him by central services. Gary recognised that a headteacher moving from a LA-maintained school to a MAT should expect a different set of responsibilities. He believed that headteachers that move from LA schools to MATs find relinquishing autonomy to their central teams challenging. "Being told that you're only responsible for teaching and learning and resources for teaching and learning and that you no longer have to worry about the facilities or IT or HR... This will mean they can really focus on what they're good at."

All of the interviewees identified central services as a key agent in the changing role of the headteacher. However, Ben and Sarah had reservations about exactly how effectively the central teams operated in this MAT and had reasons which explained how these services could actually inhibit their autonomy and cause tension. Sarah referred to the cost of having these services having an impact on the quality of teaching, explaining that there was a "high top slice". She believed that the costs could be higher if each school needed to employ their own IT, HR and finance manager, but stated that the central services in this MAT could be run more cost-effectively:

Where we have assistants of assistants, is that needed or does there need to be more accountability for the person that's appointed to manage that area? Because we don't have involvement or oversight of feedback into that, perhaps that is happening, but it creates tension.

Gary and Sarah addressed another factor that they believed inhibits their central team from working effectively. They both stated that for a MAT to be financially viable and to use this model productively it needs to incorporate more schools than the MAT currently did. Gary stated: "We need to look at growth. We need to look at becoming

economically viable. So, by the DfE, we need to be at a point of nine to ten schools within the multi-academy trust".

Gary identified that the MAT's current structure was not yet financially viable, and that the trust effectively needed to double in size for the model to work. Sarah added to this by beginning to explain how the implementation of a model that was designed for larger trusts impacted on the quality of the personnel that filled these roles. "Investment in getting the right people in but then there's not enough money in the education side and that means that you have stripped back roles and it makes everything more stretched than it needs to be because your top slice is too heavy."

Both Ben and Sarah had concerns over the operational aspects of central services. Ben believed that the drawbacks of having central services are a symptom of the model being relatively new. He believed that MATs are because the government wants to replace Las, and that "the central hub would provide services". However, he thought that "this trust has fallen foul of that (ineffective central services) because nobody ever wrote the rulebook before they began to establish multi-academy trusts". Sarah and Ben appreciated that the policy intention of more freedom to focus on teaching and learning was a good idea. In practice, they felt that the system implemented by the trust was not as efficient or effective as it could be.

### ***Theme 3: Collaboration***

Headteachers in this trust were required to work together, a new aspect to the headteacher's role. Gary stated how important it was for headteachers that came to the trust to have the ability to "make the right decisions but can work collaboratively for the interest of everyone within the trust". The participants described how collaboration could be both beneficial and a hindrance. All three interviewees cited collaboration between headteachers as a positive feature of working in a MAT. "The benefits are that you have a form of colleagues. If it works well, I as a headteacher, have the headteachers to work with and bounce ideas off and work together on a common educational policy." Ben's caveat of 'if it works well' again suggests Ben believed this trust's model is not the most effective.

Gary suggested that headteachers “are allowed to run their schools how they see fit”. All three explained that the trust used to have a strict ‘one-size-fits-all’ policy towards education which was agreed ‘collaboratively’ by the management team, including the headteachers. For example, all schools taught literacy, numeracy and grouped children in exactly the same way by following specific programmes and pedagogies. Ben believed that he had gained more autonomy over teaching and learning but warned of potential issues of collaboration between headteachers:

There was a style of teaching and learning in this trust when I came into it. I've gone away from that style more than most because I have felt I had the autonomy to do that. Therefore, when you're working in a multi-academy trust where it's trying to be set collectively, there is a danger that the person who shouts the loudest will set the educational decisions.

It was clear that there was a fine balance to be made between working collaboratively and having uniformity across the trust and allowing headteachers autonomy over their individual schools. The ‘loudest’ headteachers would have an advantage in setting expectations in a ‘one-size-fits all’ system, putting ‘quieter’ ones at a disadvantage when being held accountable to the system they had less of an influence upon designing. Sarah could also see how uniformity and collaboration could help *and* hinder her working effectively. She also felt that she had a voice in big decisions and that, since the flagship primary school (neither Ben or either of Sarah’s) in the trust was put into ‘special measures’ by Ofsted, schools have had more autonomy over their curriculum and pedagogy.

Sarah expressed confusion over the level of autonomy and the exact role and responsibilities of the headteachers in the MAT. This was another example of how this dichotomy of collaboration (and uniformity) and individual school autonomy caused tension and animosity towards governance from the headteachers, an attitude that Sarah saw as detrimental to the effective running of the MAT. Sarah may have had this view as she was asked to take on more responsibilities than other headteachers in the trust. Her role differed from other headteachers implicitly in that she was also responsible for improving attainment across the trust.

Ben gave a hypothetical example of how he felt this system had affected his leadership. Reflecting on his experience, he explained what he would do differently in a possible future job: "I think I'd be a lot clearer about what, you know, I wanted to happen within my school and not be tied to or dictated to from elsewhere".

Gary stated that headteachers need to have the skill set that allows them to both collaborate and work autonomously. Sarah and Ben found it a confusing system without clear boundaries or defined roles for the headteacher. This added to the tensions between schools and central team and senior management. None of the participants had a clear definition of the level of their autonomy, which decisions are made for the trust and which can be made at a school level. Sarah described the contradictory situation concisely: "I probably have a lot of autonomy but at the same time you're made to feel like you don't have any." The headteachers at this trust are operating in a confused state of semi-autonomous subservience to the board of trustees.

#### ***Theme 4: The future of education leadership in England***

Sarah discussed how she thought current trends would affect the young, female workforce because of restrictive employment options:

Schools don't really allow part-time work and what that's doing is isolating all of our thirty-something women who are your up-and-coming leaders. You're saying to people you have to choose between work and your family. Then there's not going to be enough people or people are going to leave the education sector.

Sarah's vision of the future alluded to the consequences of decreasing budgets, increasing workload and pressure on headteachers. Sarah here explained how these attitudes permeate across society and have consequences, such as potential missed opportunities for employing effective headteachers.

The participants identified the shift of a headteacher's role following the change in the expectations placed upon them: one that they felt appeared to lack "human aspects". Ben explained that in the future, successful headteachers will need to be "the type of people who like the numbers game, who can no doubt have resilience and move things

forward, but I wonder, are we losing sight of why we went into teaching in the first place?" He drew comparisons with the health sector, stating that "when people go to study medicine they have an interview... to see if they have the personality to deal with people in crisis". He said that "most days I deal with human issues", and he was concerned about the increasing pressure on headteachers to meet targets and raise standards.

It seems that we're burning out people, pushing them hard and expecting full standards within a short period of time. So, the only people I can see flourishing in that kind of culture are people who are out for their own gain. Schools should not just be about building careers; it should be about space for the children too.

Ben was anxious that government policymakers do not understand the complexity and nuanced responsibilities of headteachers and that his vision of what a future leader will look like may be detrimental to the development of the children who are in their care.

Sarah and Ben displayed resentment at being held to account by non-educationalists. They described how a lack of an educational background meant that there was a disconnect between headteachers and teaching staff and the CEO, trustees and central services. At times they felt that decisions and judgments were made that were not sympathetic to the tasks that the schools faced. "The trustees who hold the school to account on performance, I suggested that there should be an education committee." She also referred to weekly meetings with Gary in which she was required to explain her Development Plan to him: "I think it's just not his specialist subject".

Gary could also envisage an increase in workload and explained how this impacts headteachers. He agreed with Ben that "interpersonal skills are important professional skills to manage schools in the future" and how these will be needed to support teachers experiencing an increasing workload. He saw how this "impacts teaching and learning" and, therefore, "we are expecting and asking a lot from our leaders in this changing time, there's no getting away from that". He was worried about the lack of attention given to the human side of the job and the focus on data: "Yes let's talk about outcomes but how many children have we helped with social issues that the local

authority can't deal with because they don't have the capacity. Unfortunately, there's not enough credit given to the work that schools like ours provide."

Before making his prediction about the future of education in England, Gary explained that "it is difficult to predict the next five to ten years because unfortunately education is a political football". Gary had a cynical attitude towards education policy and here referred to how education is used as a tool for politicians to gain favour and how often short-sighted policies are adopted. Nonetheless, Gary explained how increased workload is the main concern in his vision for future headteachers. Gary stated that it is funding, or a lack thereof, that will cause headteachers of the future to face more difficult circumstances:

This will lead to increased workload caused by increasing accountability and decreasing budgets. How has workload increased if the intention is that the central services alleviate administrative pressure on headteachers. We've ring-fenced over £50,000 for counselling, we've got an educational psychologist and a safeguarding team. These can be deemed luxuries but in fact they're necessities, and I won't apologize for investing in them.

All three participants raised concerns over the future for headteachers if current policy trends continue. None of the participants could envisage an improvement in working conditions for headteachers. Emerging from this study is a picture of disconnect between the intended impact of structural change within the MAT and their subsequent impacts on headteachers. Areas of change did not always produce intended outcomes, the data from all three participants are summarised in Table 1.

Area of change affected by academisation	Intended implications for role of headteacher	Positive impact on role of headteacher at the MAT	Negative impact on role of headteacher at the MAT
Central team (services).	Free up time to enable Headteacher to focus on Teaching & Learning. Experts in place for specialist roles. Financially efficient. Robust accountability structure.	Headteacher does not need to have expertise in non-educational areas typically assigned to the role in LA.	Loss of autonomy over Teaching & Learning owing to relinquished control of services (e.g. finance, HR and IT). Not all staff in middle tier seen as adequate for the job. Inefficient services provided owing to lack of accountability to individual schools. Top slice of budget is spent on services.
Central team (governance).	Secure systems of accountability that enable a self-improving group of schools. Holistic perspective of all educational and non-educational procedures.	Headteachers held to a high standard of accountability.	Headteachers accountable to non-educationalists. Decisions made for the benefit of the 'business' rather than the quality of the education. Rise in data analysis as primary indicator of success. Lack of clearly defined roles leads to confusion.
Leadership collaboration.	Develop a self-improving system.	Headteachers can share ideas and help one another in a professional support network. CEO is focal point and responsible for finance. 'One-size-fits-all' curriculum and pedagogy allow for easier training and assessment.	Evidence of intermittent hierarchy within collaborating leaders. 'One-size-fits-all' curriculum and pedagogy contradicts Headteacher's autonomy over Teaching & Learning.

**Table 1:** Emerging intended and actual impacts of changes arising from academisation

## Discussion

The participants had mixed opinions about the new role of the headteacher. Gary, the CEO, was overtly positive about the benefits of refocusing the role of the headteachers on teaching and learning, whilst headteachers Ben and Sarah could identify both the benefits and drawbacks. The most significant positive taken from the role change, according to the participants, is the refocusing of the headteachers' attention to learning (Wood, 2017). However, their responses suggested that the trust could improve the clarity of the role and responsibilities of its headteachers. Sarah saw the redirection of responsibilities as logical, identifying that most headteachers had their backgrounds in education and are generally not experts in finance, IT or any other departments that are now covered by the trust's central services. Ben too was grateful for having specialist support with safeguarding and human resource management. Gary saw working in a MAT as more advantageous within a LA, owing to headteachers having more autonomy over teaching and learning within their schools. However, he felt that the role of the headteacher had not changed much: they were still primarily accountable for the results of the children in standardised tests. These findings corroborate Gibson (2016) in indicating the changes of a headteacher's role as they move from LA to MAT, and may well differ between different MATs.

Greany and Earley (2017) identify that the new systems of accountability, as set out in legislation, are primarily concerned with the results of standardised tests. This is a global trend that is a bi-product of the marketisation of education in a neoliberal political climate (Ball and Junemann, 2011). Ben comments on how the role of the headteacher has become more focused on data handling in preparation for being held to account by internal and external agencies, some of whom are non-educationalists. He fears that the growing predominance of school leaders who excel at playing a "numbers game", do so at the expense of the 'human side' of leadership. A fear shared by headteachers in Courtney's (2015) study, and an intended consequence of government policy (Everitt, 2022). Furthermore, he feels that the attention given to ensuring that the school's data is watertight takes attention away from teaching and learning. His fear resonates with that of Craig (2017) who sees the rise of directive leadership as a potential challenge to the future of school leadership in relation to recruitment and retention, and constitutes a hurdle in the way of headteachers gaining

more time to focus on learning. Dhillon *et al.* (2020: 64) see this 'single-minded focus on performance and driving forward excellence' as a direct result of an accountability agenda evident in national policy in England.

This study has unearthed a potential flaw in the new systems of accountability at a local level. Sarah and Ben displayed resentment at being held to account by non-educationalists. A perspective similarly held by the headteachers in Courtney's (2015) study. They described how a lack of an educational background meant that there was a disconnect between teaching staff and the trustees and central services. At times they felt that decisions and judgments were made that were not sympathetic to the challenges that the headteachers faced. Is it worth headteachers taking the risk and leaving a LA-maintained school?

The role of the CEO (Gary) represents that of the business leader (Wood, 2017) and an example of a new concept of school leader (Hughes, 2020). Gary describes his role as primarily being accountable for the trust's finances but also as the actor to implement government policy. Government policy emphasises self-improvement through evidence-based practice (Brown and Greany, 2018). Wood (2017) argues that it is because of this that business leaders now need some knowledge of education theory and practice if they are making decisions that affect schools. In order to share decisions and keep staff updated, Gary acknowledges the importance of clear communication, as do the other participants and Shaari and Hung (2018). Gary employs many strategies to ensure effective communication between him, the central services and the schools. Yet the responses from Sarah and Ben suggest that these are inadequate. The lack of clearly defined targets, roles and school structures from policymakers permeates through to the leadership structure in this MAT. Ben and Sarah state that there is no clearly defined set of responsibilities in their role, nor level of autonomy, yet they are still held to strict account for their schools' results. This reflects findings in other contemporary research (Glatter, 2012; Gibson, 2016; Simkins, 2015; Simon *et al.*, 2021).

The version of distributed leadership among the headteachers at the MAT is reminiscent of the model that Gunter *et al.* (2013) refer to as 'normative'; there is a division of labour (among the headteachers) with a single leader (Gary) as the centre of distribution. Gary identified the need for headteachers working in multi-school

organisations to be decisive *and* work collaboratively with other school leaders. Ehren and Perryman (2018: 956) claim that, generally speaking, ‘the benefits of collaboration are unclear’. All the participants stated that there are advantages to working with other headteachers and Bubb *et al.* (2019) identified school-led partnerships as one of their key recommendations for school improvement as part of the role of the middle tier. Ben found that other school leaders acted as a sounding board for his and their ideas, and that problems could be solved that perhaps would not have been without this support network of peers. Sarah too thought that working collaboratively enabled quicker problem-solving and that being part of this group, she felt she had a voice in big decisions, evidence of Gunter *et al.*’s (2013) notion of the dual existence of contribution equality and intermittent hierarchy.

Greany (2018) clarified that harmonious collaboration is not so simple. Ben and Sarah mentioned the ‘one-size-fits-all’, standardised model of teaching and learning, actively encouraged by the government (Simkins *et al.*, 2019). Dhillon *et al.* (2020) attribute the marginalisation of innovative approaches to curriculum development to national policy and strict accountability measures placed on schools. Ben and Sarah, as well as Simkins *et al.* (2019), described how evidence-informed decisions on teaching and learning might not work on a large scale. This trust is relatively small, geographically and in number of schools, compared with other MATs in England. Yet the participants expressed how strategies that had worked well in one of the schools in the trust, had very different results in another. The trust began moving away from a standardised model after some of the schools received poor test results and feedback from inspections. However, Sarah and Ben, as Boyask (2018) recognised, felt as though they were still relinquishing autonomy over teaching and learning. Furthermore, the knock-on effect was that final decisions in this area tended to go to the CEO and trustees, as evidenced by Simon *et al.* (2021). Additional tension is created here because the CEO and trustees do not have an educational background. There is a clear paradox in the responsibilities of headteachers in MATs who must employ a ‘one-size-fits-all’ pedagogy, yet have been told their role is to focus on teaching and learning.

Academisation requires MATs to develop middle tiers to replace the support and accountability network previously provided by the LA (Bubb *et al.*, 2019; Simkins *et al.*,

2019; Simon *et al.*, 2021). Reference to ‘central services’ by the participants includes the board of trustees and CEO, more of the middle tier than just the central services. Simkins (2015), Coldron *et al.* (2014) and Earley and Greany (2017) all identify sharing resources as part of the government’s plan to establish a self-improving school system likely to accommodate ‘austerity measures applied to school budgets’ (Thompson *et al.*, 2021: 230). Shaari and Hung (2018) can envisage how a central agent can theoretically enable collaboration between headteachers and can alleviate some of the pressure placed on them by providing resources that would be unavailable were they a stand-alone school. However, they warn that clear communication and a shared vision are essential to a central agent’s success and that individualism born out of competition could cause friction between the central agent and schools, as well as between leaders.

Gary and Sarah would agree with Shaari and Hung (2018) that having ‘central services’ in a MAT is theoretically an effective structure to replace the middle tier provided by the LA. Furthermore, Sarah points out that the trust is free to appoint experts in each of these departments, whereas in a LA maintained school, the responsibilities would fall on the headteacher. However, all the participants had reservations about how central services were structured and managed within the trust. These findings are comparable to Wilkins, who found that joining a MAT with the government promise of enhanced autonomy, MATs ‘reproduce the same kinds of legal-bureaucratic arrangements practised by local government’ (2017: 172). The MAT in Gibson’s case study had set up ‘regional hubs’ to deal with issues arising from the geographical dispersion of its schools, which appeared to be ‘a ‘wheel reinvention’ of a LA’ (2018: 95).

There is a dichotomy of accountability in the role of the headteachers working in organisations with central agents. A central agent that manages ‘non-education’ responsibilities of school leadership can potentially help to refocus a headteacher’s attention on learning (Shaari and Hung, 2018; Wood, 2017) and when working well is a key indicator of a successful organisation (Bubb *et al.*, 2019). However, it can also be seen as a loss of autonomy for the headteacher over departments that can affect the quality of educational provision in their school (Greany, 2017). All three participants stated that one of the challenges of having central services was that headteachers did

not have control over trust-wide resources. Ben felt that he had limited authority over the departments in central services and, therefore, simple tasks to improve education in his school became drawn out with bureaucracy and lines of command as was also identified by Bubb *et al.* (2019).

The system of accountability in the trust meant that each of the departments within central services was accountable to the CEO and trustees directly, corroborating Simon *et al.*'s (2021) identification of the devolution of autonomy away from the headteacher. Gary and Sarah stressed how the trust was struggling financially and so each department had to justify its budget and avoid any unnecessary costs. This suggested that the MAT's middle tier was not cost-effective (Davies *et al.*, 2021). The headteachers, and to some extent the CEO, voiced that action or inaction by central services affected teaching and learning in their schools. The headteachers felt that it was unfair that they lacked autonomy over these areas but were still held accountable for academic outcomes. This is evidence for Courtney's argument that the corporatisation of educational leadership has led to the interests of 'corporate' actors' (2015: 221). In this case the middle tier outweighing those of the educationalists.

The system of accountability within the trust has led to conflicts of interests between schools and central services. It is this corporate model that is the result of the marketisation of the education system through recent government policy (Ball and Junemann, 2011; Courtney, 2015; Shaari and Hung, 2018; Simkins, 2015). This study has shown that it requires competent personnel and effective systems of accountability for it to work. What is the role of the headteacher if these decisions are not made at school level? Furthermore, Dhillon *et al.*'s (2020: 65) research states that 'for outstanding leadership to thrive and survive, inspirational and aspirational aspects of leadership need to be complemented by decisive action to address poor performance'. Can a headteacher in this trust adhere to and perform 'outstandingly' according to these indicators if they do not have control over areas which would enable them to address poor performance?

## Conclusion

Academisation is a policy in progress with a significant impact on headteacher roles. This study has indicated that the creation of MATs has had unintended consequences

for the role of the headteacher, as schools move from a LA to a MAT. Ben particularly could see how the experimental nature of these policies had led to the MAT having to adapt to its situation without having any blueprints to follow, and consequently has had to learn from its mistakes. The trust would have felt this more than most as it was established in 2010, at the beginning of rapid academisation. Ball and Junemann (2011) and Glatter (2012) both warned about how the speed at which policy was changing the landscape of education into unknown territory, and without an evidence base (Gunter and McGinity, 2014), would lead to ineffective leadership structures in these new, multi-school organisations.

In this MAT, the headteachers were operating in roles with considerable contradictions, particularly regarding teaching and learning. They had been afforded more time to focus on education by the MAT, yet had no control over services; they were accountable for the educational results, yet had to conform to a collaborative curriculum. This dichotomy can be described as a semi-autonomous subservience to these new actors that have emerged as a direct result of academisation. Although the policy of academisation is unlikely to change (Simkins *et al.*, 2019), the absence of a new, workable leadership model to apply within MATs is the root cause of the challenges that face headteachers in their new roles. Education policy would have to remain unchanged to allow the 'dust to settle' and provide school and organisation leaders enough time to investigate and establish roles for headteachers that are effective in meeting the new requirements. In his article on leadership preparation and development within a MAT, Gibson (2018) states that adequate preparation for and development of the role of headteacher is essential for a school to succeed. Either that or, as Bubb *et al.* (2019) suggest, policymakers provide prescriptive, evidence-based models themselves. This may come through collaboration, even between trusts, but while the goalposts are still moving toward uncharted territory (Thompson *et al.*, 2021), it is unlikely that a successful blueprint for the new role will emerge any time soon. In addition, our headteacher sample appeared to resent being line-managed by their non-educationalist CEO. If this is an increasingly common structure in England, then there are consequences for leadership preparation expectations, and it is important that potential headteachers appreciate the new role.

Further empirical research into the realities for leaders in trusts is needed to determine whether the perceptions presented here are reflective of the wider population. Additionally, more investigation into the effectiveness of different MAT structures, particularly regarding the impact of their central teams on budgets and academic outcomes, would help to inform future policy.

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