

Leadership Preparation and Development within a Multiple Academy Trust: Self-improving or Self-serving?

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Abstract

There has been a large-scale structural reform of schooling in England during the 21st Century; new 'academy schools' have emerged, the organisation of which differs to schooling in the latter half of the 20th Century. These new schools are independent of the middle tier of local government, the Local Authority (LA), and are often grouped within a Multiple Academy Trust (MAT). This article is a case study of two academy schools within a single MAT. Interviews were held with three participants, two principals and a MAT senior representative. The schools differed in their range of LPD but welcome practice is indicated particularly within one school with a specific emphasis on middle leader development. The paper concludes that if LPD is important for successful schools, then quality assurance systems for LPD within MATs need to be in place and its provision ought not to be left to the marketplace.

Key Words: Multiple Academy Trusts, Leadership Preparation and Development, System Leadership, Academy Schools

Introduction: the context

The 21st Century has seen a significant change in the educational landscape in England (Simkins, 2015; Gibson, 2016) with new agents of change arising, such as academies, state-funded independent schools, the first of which opened in 2002. There was a rapid rise in such schools following the Academies Act 2010; in 2010 there were only 203 academy schools all of which were in the secondary phase (post 11 years of age) but by July 2017 there were over 6, 000 academies in a variety of age phases and sectors. This equates to 30% of state run schools (Department for Education, 2017). Prior to this all state schools from 1944 were organised within a geographically defined Local Education Authority (later a Local Authority or LA), a middle tier of local government. This period of education policy in England has been described as a 'golden triangle' between the national government, the LA and the teaching profession (Abbott et al., 2013). This structural arrangement provided a balance of control between central and local powers, no single interest had a controlling voice, allowing for a "system of checks and balances which ensured no one player had a monopoly of power" (Abbott et al., 2013: 52); creating a consensus. The academy model is an alternative system of school organisation; the stated aim of the

national government is for all schools to become academies and the preferred system of governance is within a MAT (Education Committee, 2017: 6).

This change of landscape has also created a change in the supply of LPD; during this same post-2010 period, there has been a change in LPD structures. The establishment of the National College for School Leadership (later National College and more recently, National College for Teaching and Leadership) in 2000 was significant in the history of LPD within the UK and the College's National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) became a mandatory qualification for all new headteachers (principals) in 2009 (Bush, 2011). However, the situation has changed over the intervening years; the College became not solely focused on leadership (its name changing to reflect teaching), the NPQH became non-mandatory in 2012 (Bush, 2016) and the landmark building in Nottingham has subsequently been sold. If Bush (2009: 387) describes the process in the first decade of the 21st Century as leadership development being "nationalised", then it appears that the following decade has seen it "privatised".

The purpose of this paper is to explore the shift to LPD within a MAT by using a single case study. There was a single overarching research question; how does Leadership Preparation and Development occur within this Multiple Academy Trust? Following further review of the context of MATs and LPD, small-scale empirical evidence is shared. Finally, the wider potential challenges of this shift to MAT based LPD are considered.

Leadership Preparation and Development

LPD has been variously described as a strategic necessity (Bush 2008), a 'crucial aspect of school development and progression' (Cowie & Crawford, 2009: 129) and that employers have a 'moral obligation to develop employees' (Bush 2009: 377). If school leadership is critical for school success then preparation for the role and development within it are logical necessities.

Bolam (1999:196) argues that leadership development can be grouped into four modes: 'knowledge for understanding'; 'knowledge for action'; 'improvement of practice' and 'development of a reflexive mode'. One of the issues surrounding LPD from some providers is a move away from Bolam's 'knowledge for understanding', to

a more prescriptive functional approach. The danger of such LPD is one that creates leaders who may lack vision and knowledge of alternative directions. Exemplary LPD programmes share common features including a well-defined theory of school leadership (Orphanos and Orr, 2013). Coaching (Roberston, 2009) and mentoring (Hobson, 2003) are perceived as key processes of leadership development. The strength of mentoring is particularly important in the initial stages of principalship, where there may be a need for the new incumbent to address the affective nature of the post. LPD is also perceived as a method of succession planning along with different models of co-leadership. In a context where there are difficulties with maintaining an adequate supply of principals, LPD can be used to promote the attractions of leadership (Bush, 2011).

Multiple Academy Trusts (MATs)

The first academy school in England opened in 2002 and the academy programme essentially concerned school renewal; these were often inner city schools that were perceived as failing and requiring new structures to assist them. This included a break from the organisation of the LA and a sponsor, who was often a business philanthropist, (though subsequently universities, other schools, faith groups or voluntary groups) in order to create a new ethos and vision (Gibson, 2015). During the first decade of the 21st Century academy schools increasingly became organised within a group, initially referred to as a 'chain' (Hill, 2010) and subsequently a Multiple Academy Trust (MAT). Since the 2010 Act the number of MATs has also increased. In March 2011 there were 391 MATs by November 2016 there were 1,121, which contained 4,140 schools (Education Committee, 2017: 4). Some MATS have all of their academies located in a confined geographic area, whilst others are dispersed nationally. This significant policy change in the schooling landscape is contested.

Sponsors of academies are perceived by some as 'new agents' and are part of the 're-agenting' of the school system, "the replacing of older forces for change by new agents capable of driving the government's agenda" (Hatcher, 2006: 614). This is perceived as part of the marketisation and the privatisation of the school system in England (Chitty, 2009; Hatcher, 2011).

The geographical dispersion of academies within a MAT particularly has raised concerns as it was in contrast to the LA, to which the predecessor school would belong. The House of Commons Education Committee noted that, “In its early enthusiasm for MATs, the Government encouraged trusts to expand too quickly over too large geographical regions. Schools which operate within close proximity to one another are best able to share resources and expertise and subsequently can most successfully take advantage of being part of a MAT” (Education Committee, 2017: 18).

As academisation has increased and subsequently more schools have left LA control the role of LAs is now increasingly restricted; the system is somewhat fragmented at the middle tier, with previous roles reduced (Simkins et al., 2015). The future vision of LAs appears to be limited to one whereby they ensure all children have a school place and in particular championing the needs of vulnerable groups (Education Committee, 2017: 19). High performing MATs have been characterised as having “well developed CPD programmes, good leadership development structures; they identify their rising stars and develop their careers” (Education Committee, 2017: 8).

The MAT model however is a positive development for some in that it offers a significant opportunity to create LPD in addition to other aspects of school development. This enhanced school-to-school collaboration aims at improving the quality of teaching and the ‘richness of children’s learning’ (Greany and Ehren, 2016). Greany (2015) also argues that school-to-school support is now the primary source of school improvement in England whilst others have noted that school leaders look mainly to their peers for ideas and inspiration (Earley et al., 2012).

Hargreaves (2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b) has been instrumental in advocating system leadership and perceives this concept and the consequent ‘System Leaders’ as powerful tools for school improvement. LPD becomes a self-generating system grounded in networks of schools. MATs may offer this network.

Given this radical shift in the nature of school provision in England and the established importance of school leadership then it seems of use to explore LPD within these new structures. A small-scale case study may be able to enlighten the issues surrounding LPD within this new framework.

Methodology

The research project that this paper reports upon consisted of a small-scale case study of a single MAT. The purposive sample was drawn from a list of MATs that were contacted in order to participate; each MAT on the larger list displayed leadership development as a specific aim on their web site. The case study MAT is described as a large MAT with responsibility for twenty-four academy schools that are widely geographically dispersed across England. Three face-to-face hour-long semi-structured, confidential interviews were held with a Trust Director responsible for LPD and two Academy Principals from the MAT during December 2016. The interviews were transcribed and emergent themes analysed (Huberman and Miles, 2002). The analysis is explorative and illuminative as opposed to evaluative. In addition to the issues surrounding generalisation from a very small sample, evaluating LPD programmes is fraught with methodological concerns (Cowie and Crawford 2009; Showanasai, et al., 2013).

Findings and Discussion

This section aims to discuss the findings of the project in relation to the general research question, how does Leadership Preparation and Development occur within this Multiple Academy Trust? Emergent themes are located, analysed and discussed within the policy contexts of system leadership and academisation.

The participants will be referred to by their pseudonyms in order to protect anonymity. 'Jennifer' is a MAT senior representative, a Trustee who has a role of School Improvement Officer for secondary phase academies across the entire MAT and has specific responsibility for CPD. 'John' is an established principal of Academy A within the MAT, he has led its improvement and it is now rated 'Good' by the national school inspectorate, Ofsted. 'James' is a newly appointed principal of another academy within the MAT, Academy B, which is rated as 'Requiring Improvement' by Ofsted. The operational relationships between MATs and individual academy principals vary with some MATs offering greater autonomy. The MAT-principal relationship within this particular MAT would fit a description of Laissez-faire, whereby principals are offered a larger degree of autonomy than some other MATs (Gibson, 2016).

There were a variety of issues surrounding LPD which were raised across each of the interviews but the key emergent themes were: collegiality and system leadership; LPD as a succession policy; coaching and mentoring as tools for LPD; the LPD of middle leaders and the constraints of a MAT whose academies are geographically dispersed.

System leadership, whereby leaders from schools assist others in a self-improving school system (Hargreaves, 2010), appears to be operational to some extent within this MAT. The MAT organises regular forums for school principals and middle leaders, instigates reviews of the educational quality of curriculum areas within each academy and believes CPD, in particular LPD, to be of importance. Reviews of individual academies involve principals from other academies within the MAT. In this situation principals within the MAT not only offer their experience to others but also the MAT leadership perceive it as a means of LPD for the 'reviewing' principal. This peer-to-peer review process is the preferred method of idea generation for principals (Earley et al., 2012). Academies that have strengths in one area may well assist the development of others. For example, 'John' assisted other schools in improving the quality of their mathematics teaching:

"There were two academies in the MAT that were struggling with standards in maths so I went into these schools, with colleagues from our academy, and I led reviews of maths teaching. This enabled me to develop and gain experience I otherwise would not have had. Their standard in maths has raised too". John, principal Academy A.

The symbiotic nature of the LPD for 'John' and the mathematics middle leaders was recognised by 'Jennifer' and it is a model that is now used across the MAT. Subject departments within a given academy will have reviews led by teams of teachers and leaders from other academies within the MAT. 'Jennifer' perceives it as a method of, "improving the leadership capacity of the staff who are leading the review". This is typical of Hargreaves' system leadership concept however, further work would be required in order to establish if the practice is an example of Hargreaves' (2012) robust 'evaluation and challenge' concept. There were however, significant differences in LPD provision between the two academies; the operational quality across the MAT varied and the network does not appear to be working in what Hargreaves refers to as 'deep partnership'. 'Jennifer' stated that "it is early days yet and the systems are not all fully established and embedded".

A major justification of LPD, by the MAT representative 'Jennifer', was as a succession policy. The MAT had talent 'bleed' alongside recruitment difficulties to leadership positions like many schools in England (Earley et al., 2012), so they wished to 'grow their own' from within. 'James' appointment as principal to Academy B was cited as a case in point by 'Jennifer'. 'James' explained that he was able to increase the leadership experience for several staff following his appointment. He believed that he could "create a 'domino' effect, where several staff were internally promoted to leadership positions following my appointment. We will then develop them". 'John', from Academy A, also had used the vacancy of one senior member of staff on maternity leave to create an enlarged temporary senior team made of middle leaders, saying that "this will also allow some of our middle leaders to have the opportunity to develop into senior leaders to fill any space we may have in the future". This 'on the job' approach appeared to be the main LPD within James' Academy B, which was not making the same LPD provision as John's Academy A. Hargreaves (2010) refers to succession planning within system leadership and a self-improving school system in the sense of an organised co-constructed, planned model by networks. This was not the case in the case study, the concept of capacity building was certainly to serve the functions of the MAT, rather than individual development and was a response to talent loss. Indeed concern was expressed over the LPD within the MAT creating potential opportunities for staff to leave the MAT as 'Jennifer' conceded. She stated that "one concern is that when we created bespoke LPD training for middle to senior leaders and all the attendees left the MAT.....so you have to try and balance erm improving people and then you lose your talent".

Coaching and mentoring were the main tools used for LPD within the MAT. Initially the MAT brokered the use of School Improvement Partners (SiPs) from existing LA support, which were used exclusively for new principal support, however they have now moved to in-house arrangements. 'John' from Academy A now mentors 'James' although 'John' was mentored by a former LA SiP. Both John and James were finding this relationship beneficial, as 'John' emphasises, "I was mentored when I first started by a very experienced HMI, I now mentor a new principal – and that is good development for me too". In 'John's and 'James' case, 'John' has not undertaken any specific mentor training which has been found to be a requirement for success in mentoring programmes (Hobson, 2003). The use of coaching and mentoring as a tool

is having greater use within the MAT, a newly appointed assistant principal at 'James' Academy B, for example is mentored by a representative from the MAT. This also raises the potential problem in the case of the employer (the MAT) being the mentor. Concern may be raised over the element of trust in the relationship when, as part of such a relationship, the client may wish to express concerns about their employer. It would be difficult in this scenario.

The development of middle leaders has been the focus for this MAT's LPD. This was a needs-based initiative; the quality of middle leadership was a concern expressed by principals and from Ofsted inspections across the academies within the MAT, a common feature also appearing in Earley et al.'s (2012) review of the leadership landscape nationally. There was a significant difference in the practice within the two case study academies, with greater emphasis on LPD in Academy A. In this school middle leaders were expected to participate in the middle leaders CPD programme which differed from the CPD for other staff with an emphasis on LPD. There were opportunities for some middle leaders to experience temporary senior leadership roles which were created due to a maternity leave absence of a permanent senior leader, and action research projects by middle leaders were being encouraged. These projects allowed middle leaders to gain experience of leading whole school development not just their curricular area focus. External providers of LPD, such as the National College, were also used with 11 staff undertaking courses leading to a formal qualification. Academy B however, was at an earlier stage in their journey and hoped to benefit from Academy A's experience. For example no staff member was involved in externally provided LPD.

One particular issue surrounding MATs as a structural means of school organisation is that of geographical location of the academy schools. As referred to earlier some MATs have their academies located in close proximity, others are dispersed over a wide area with travelling time difficult between schools and the MAT headquarters, this is different to the LA model. The case study MAT has a very wide dispersion of its academies and the consequential constraints were apparent to all three participants. It caused specific problems with the mentoring and coaching method of LPD; leaders could not physically meet within appropriate periods. The MAT, according to 'Jennifer', is intending to grow and then revolve around local 'hubs' of academies working together that are physically close, she states, "we recognise that people cannot

physically get to meet for LPD and CPD. So we will revolve more around local hubs in future. We obviously need to become a bigger MAT in order to do this". Whilst this is welcomed by 'John', he perceived a bigger issue in that MAT trustees were not as aware of his staff as their counterparts would have been in an LA:

"the challenge within a MAT model is that the MAT do not have a good understanding and knowledge of the staff within the academy in the same way as an LA would. This is often to do with the geography of the MAT and its dispersal", 'John', Principal Academy A.

This MAT appeared to be demonstrating practice with LPD that is welcomed, although it varied significantly between the two academies. This appears to be primarily due to 'John's own drive when he states, "I would say that my own development has been down to me rather than the trust. If it's something I feel I need to develop then I try to action it."

Conclusion

This case study of LPD within a MAT indicates that there is practice that is welcome, but all participants believed that they need to increase the amount of provision within their schools. In this particular MAT the LPD provision appears mainly to be functional and an example of Bolam's (1999) 'knowledge for action'; it is serving the needs of the MAT. There is a lack of knowledge content, particularly at Academy B with the emphasis being 'on the job' LPD. There is no overall MAT policy on LPD and there is not an articulated philosophy, which is required for good LPD (Bush, 2009) nor an indication of staff entitlement. There is also evidence of what Greany and Ehren refer to as 'design in flight' (Education Committee, 2017: 18), with practice being made in response to events such as the MAT's creation of executive principal posts as a means of staff retention as opposed to a belief of it being a preferred leadership structure. The creation of regional hubs will to some extent address the problems associated with LPD due to geographical dispersion of the MAT, although this does appear to be a 'wheel reinvention' of a LA and will still be on a smaller scale in terms of school numbers and may be larger geographically.

The larger national policy picture here is one of the context of academisation. The removal of the 'golden triangle' of national government, LAs and teachers (Abbott et al., 2013) has created a situation where there is a lack of coherence and structure

nationally and that LPD provision is left to the market, with each MAT being a different supplier. 'James', the principal of Academy B alluded to this when he referred to some provision from the MAT by saying, "it's like the heyday of the LA". The golden triangle allowed national initiatives to be developed locally, with teachers being involved in their own CPD development, which gave rise to a consensus. The MAT model appears to use teachers as consumers within the market to different suppliers (MATs), however diversity of supply does not necessarily create diversity of thought. Differences in LPD within the market may cause some cases that solely reflect the value set of the specific MAT, it could well be that a given MAT's LPD is purely to serve the functional purposes of that MAT. High quality LPD provides competent leaders who can not only serve their employers well but also have a degree of criticality that allows them to be reflective practitioners in order to improve the quality of their leadership. There is a danger that if MAT driven LPD has little quality assurance it may not provide that level of criticality. If MATs are to be the main provider of leadership preparation and development within the school system in England then quality assurance systems need to exist in order to ensure that such vital work is not left to the vagaries of the market. One recommendation is that this process should be undertaken by the inspection service Ofsted (Education Committee, 2017: 11) in a similar way to which it presently inspects LA services. Such a move could well help alleviate this concern and would be welcomed.

There are obvious limitations in this very small-scale case study; however, it does raise the issue of the practice of LPD within MATs. Further work would be useful to see the practice across a range of MATs and Bolam's four modes may be useful in assisting analysis. It would be of use to see to what extent 'knowledge for understanding' is applied to LPD within MATs. It may be a case that the LPD lacks content or that the MAT acquires external sourcing of content, for example in this study Academy A provides funding for several leaders to attend externally validated courses. MATs clearly see LPD as important for their improvement and for them as a high quality employer; as there are now over a 1,000 MATs it is important that this service is quality assured and that institutions (MATs) that are part of the self-improvement system do not have LPD that is solely self-serving.

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