

**The impact of multi-academy trust (MAT)
governance and accountability systems on
the people involved in the organisation.**

Implications for professional autonomy and
agency, local representation, and claims to
legitimacy.

H. RYAN-ATKIN

PhD 2023

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HELEN RYAN-ATKIN

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements of Manchester Metropolitan
University for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

School of Teacher Education and
Professional Development
Faculty of Health and Education
Manchester Metropolitan University

2023

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My most heartfelt thanks must go to all the people who participated in this study, without whom this research would not have been possible. They gave their time to share their experiences, often in hot and stuffy conditions, and sometimes after a long day in the classroom. I thank those individuals who helped arrange the interviews at their site, and their willingness to fit in with my timetable.

I am indebted to the excellent supervision of Dr Linda Hammersley-Fletcher and Dr Harriet Rowley, who, through their advice, guidance and words of wisdom, helped shaped my initial thoughts into the final study. Thank you also to previous supervisors, Dr Gee Macrory and Mr Peter Hick.

Thank you to Manchester Metropolitan University for supporting and part-funding my studies, and to the Graduate School for their advice and programme of support. Thanks also to my colleagues at MMU, who provided a collegiate network of scholarship and challenge.

I am grateful to the many external researchers and scholars who generously shared their own research and views with me, and who provided advice and ideas for this study.

Finally, thank you to my family and friends for giving me the space to conduct this study, and for their understanding when I had to put the study before spending time with them.

I dedicate this thesis to my Mum and Dad, who were great believers in the power of education, and would have been interested in many of the issues raised in this study.

ABSTRACT

Since its inception in the early 2000s, the Academies Programme in England has developed apace, with the Academies Act of 2010 encouraging schools to move out of local authority control, and a more recent policy intention for all schools in England to be part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) by 2030 (DfE, 2022). This has provoked growing concern over the structures of governance and accountability within compulsory education, and the facility for public scrutiny. With major decision-making increasingly at MAT-level, there are implications for the autonomy of school leaders and local governors. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of individuals in MATs, and the implications for professional autonomy and agency of the centralization of governance and accountability. In so doing, it also examined what made the MAT legitimate.

Using qualitative methods, this longitudinal study was framed within a phenomenological-interpretivist approach, conducting interviews over a period of four years with individuals (CEOs, trustees, local governors, academy leaders and staff and parents) across four MATs in England. Additionally, policy enactment theory was used to frame participants' experiences within both the national and local policy context.

The findings highlighted the fragility of a system over-reliant on the reputation and expertise of the founding CEO, whilst appointing trustees who often lacked education knowledge and understanding of local issues and priorities. A lack of plurality and representation on the trust board, together with limited agency for academy leads, the reduction in local governor autonomous decision-making powers and parental reluctance to be involved in the new system, all pointed to a diminishment of space for the local voice.

Future policy formation on MATs needs to address the following issues. First, the development of a more participative system of governance and downward and lateral systems of accountability, which would address the value of including the local voice and recognise the importance of restoring local professional agency and autonomy. Second, improving representation and appropriate expertise on trust boards to be a truer reflection of the academy communities they serve, to prevent the charge of MATs appointing 'people like us', and to ensure they can provide effective, intellectual scrutiny and challenge to the CEO and their staff.

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LIST OF TERMINOLOGY AND ABBREVIATIONS USED

Terminology used throughout the thesis

‘Academies Programme’

A policy by various UK governments from New Labour to the current Conservative Government, to move control of schools in England from Local Authority to independent sponsors, or ‘trusts’.

‘MAT’ (multi-academy trust)

The term ‘MAT’, for multi-academy trust, is used to denote the whole organisation (or ‘trust’), from the trust board and CEO, MAT management, local governing boards, individual academies and their staff, and the parents whose children attend them. The ‘MAT community’ is also sometimes used to refer to this. There are times in this study when I refer to the ‘MAT’ to mean the main body in overall control – the management team, CEO (Chief Executive Officer) and trust board.

‘Schools’, ‘academies’ and their leaders

Under the Academies Programme system, when schools become independent of the Local Authority, they are directly accountable to the Department for Education (DfE), and become academies. All the schools in a MAT are academies. I have tried to use the term ‘academy’ throughout, when referring to these schools. Consequently, heads of academies have been referred to as ‘academy leads/heads’. These leaders are variously given the title ‘Principal’, ‘Head-of-School’ (HoS) or ‘headteacher’; ‘Executive Principal’ tends to be used for a leader who is head across several academies, although some secondary academy leaders of a single school adopt this title, as in this research study. I have used the term ‘school’ in a general way, when discussing other research, or the education-system. I have also used this term for establishments which are considering joining a MAT, as they have not yet become an academy.

‘Local Governing Body’ (LGB), ‘Local Advocate Board’ (LAB), ‘Local Academy Board’ (LAB)

All are terms to denote the local group of governors, sometime re-named ‘advocates’, attached to one or more academy. ‘LGB’ is the traditional term used when schools are part of a local authority; ‘LAB’ is a newer term adopted by some MATs.

‘Local Authority’ (LA)

The elected council for a particular area. MATs largely operate independently of these and are instead accountable to the Department for Education (DfE).

‘Stakeholder’

An individual who had a vested interest in the MAT. Within this thesis, this includes the following: all people in positions of governance; those working in the MAT, from CEO to individual academy staff; parents; members of the community local to the academy; members of the LA who were involved in setting up the MAT; ex-sponsors.

Ofsted gradings: ‘Outstanding’, ‘Good’, ‘Requires Improvement (RI)’, ‘Inadequate’

Following a school Ofsted inspection, a grade is assigned to the school, with ‘Outstanding’ being the highest, and ‘Inadequate’ the lowest.

Abbreviations used (not referred to above):

AGM	Annual General Meeting
ASCL	Association of School and College Lecturers
BELMAS	British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CofE	Church of England
CTC	City Technology College
DfE	Department for Education
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GMC	Greater Manchester Challenge
GMS	Grant-Maintained Status
LMS	Local Management of Schools
LPD	Leadership Preparation and Development
MMU	Manchester Metropolitan University
NERA	Nordic Educational Research Association
NGA	National Governance Association
NLE	National Leaders of Education
Ofsted/OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
RSC	Regional Schools Commissioner
SAT	Single Academy Trust
SLT	Senior Leadership Team

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS

1.1 The focus of the study

In 2022 the UK Government stated that:

‘[In England] by 2030, all children will benefit from being taught in a family of schools, with their school in a strong multi academy trust or with plans to join or form one’ (DfE, 2022:43).

The Government gave a reassurance that these ‘strong trusts’ would be ‘held accountable to a set of clear roles and responsibilities’ (DfE, 2022:43). This is the most recent iteration of the academies policy, with its beginnings going back to the late 1980s, and effectively removes schools in England from Local Authority (LA) control, replacing oversight with charitable trusts (‘multi-academy trusts’, or ‘MATs’). There are a number of reasons why this policy drive, which would transform the compulsory education landscape in England, has alarmed education practitioners, academics and opposition politicians, and this study aims to explore some of these concerns with people most affected by it. First, it is not clear how ‘strong trusts’ would be held accountable, and to whom. By the Government’s own admission, the system that has evolved as a result of the Academies Programme and the growth of MATs is ‘messy and often confusing’ (DfE, 2022:46): one of the reasons for this seems to be a lack of explicit direction from the DfE on the systems of governance and accountability which MATs can adopt. Whilst all MATs are required to be run by an appointed trust board, guidance on local governance at school level is sparse, and arrangements are left to the individual MATs. A second issue identified by several scholars, is the legitimacy of these organisations which now have no LA-input, yet have major responsibility for their academy communities (e.g., Gibton, 2017; Glatter, 2017; Greany and Higham, 2018; Hatcher, 2014). Greany and Higham (2018:12) have described the MAT system as ‘chaotic centralisation’, broadly ‘characterised by competing claims to authority and legitimacy but diminishing local knowledge about schools’. This deficit of knowledge over local issues highlights further points of concern: power and accountability are located within a relatively small group of unelected individuals (the ‘trust’), and subsequently, there is increasing doubt over the extent to which staff, local governors, parents and other stakeholders ‘have a sense of belonging and control’ over

their own schools (Tinker, 2015:11). These policy changes have resulted in reduced levels of public scrutiny (e.g., Ball, 2012a; 2017; Gunter, 2011) and again prompts the question of how MATs can demonstrate accountability.

With this shift in school governance from democratically elected bodies of single schools, to appointed trust boards accountable for an expanding number of schools within their MAT, previous research (e.g., Gunter, 2011; Glatter, 2017; Greany and Higham, 2018; Simkins et al, 2015; Tinker, 2015; Wilkins 2012; 2015; 2019) has identified some of the misgivings identified above, surrounding the legitimacy of academies in the face of blurred boundaries between public and private concerns over the accountability and governance of schools in England. However, comparatively few studies have focused on how these broad trends are being interpreted at the micro, everyday level. Some examples of these include Salokangas and Ainscow (2018) who examined the concept of autonomy within one academy; Gunter and McGinty (2014) who studied the impact of the academy conversion process within two academies, and the role of natality and pluralism; Wilkins (2015; 2016; 2018), who has done extensive work on the impact of the academies programme on the professionalization of school governors and democracy; and Gibson (2018) whose research focused on leadership development within two academies in one MAT. This phenomenological study aims to add to the body of research by exploring how the new governance and accountability structures of the MAT system were conceived and had been experienced by a range of stakeholders at different levels, from CEOs to parents, within four MATs in England. It has sought to explore how professional autonomy and agency at the local level had been affected, and how MATs were seen to be legitimate in their mission of education providers.

1.2 Personal motivation for conducting this study

As a former teacher and school governor, a member of an LA school-improvement team, and latterly a senior lecturer in teacher education, I have a strong interest in the impact and implementation of education policy on both those tasked with its enactment, and those influenced by it, directly or indirectly. As a frequent visitor to schools over several decades, working closely with both teachers and school leaders, it has been clear to me that reactions and experiences to central policies vary considerably, as do understandings of interpretations of new policy initiatives, and the way they are implemented. I was

interested in how school colleagues and parents would view, and have been affected by the Government's move to a more intensive academisation programme, with the radical policy of a MAT-centred governance system replacing that of the LA. The Conservative Government in 2016 claimed that such changes to the compulsory education system would 'set schools free from the shackles of local bureaucracy' (Osborne, 2016:n.p.), and that it would also 'empower parents and communities' and provide a clearly defined role for local governors (DfE, 2016a). I felt that such claims needed to be examined within the context of where the policies were being enacted – MATs and their component academies - and that the personal experiences of those involved, needed to be heard and interpreted. I wanted to design a research study which would gather the developing thoughts of a range of people, on this agenda as they experienced it, and this is what guided me to adopt the phenomenological-interpretivist research approach, detailed in Section 1.6. This methodological approach positions the importance of the interviews, with the voices and experiences of the interviewees as central to the study. Whilst the study was framed by the policies and concepts around education governance and accountability, it was the essence of these personal experiences of policy enactment, and how both macro and micro-level contextual factors influenced experiences, which would form the basis for my research.

1.3 The policy context

The Academies Programme has its origins in the UK Conservative governments from 1979-1997. The City Technology College initiative (CTC), introduced in 1986, aimed to establish business-sponsored colleges as state-independent schools in industrial areas, with a focus on technical and practical education. In 1988, with the Education Reform Act (UK Government, 1988) Thatcher's administration allowed secondary schools to opt out of LA control through grant-maintained status (GMS), where parents had agreed to this move through a ballot. While schools were given budgetary incentives to change to GMS, most schools which applied had been threatened with closure under reorganization schemes (Gillard, 2018), with Simon (1991:551) observing that 'very few schools ... voted to opt out simply to free themselves from local authority control'. Around the same time, the move to Local Management of Schools (LMS), which was available to all schools with more than 200 pupils, saw the gradual delegation of budgets to schools, away from LA

oversight. In addition, this gave new powers and responsibilities to school governing bodies, such as overseeing the secular curriculum, the inclusion of sex education in school, ensuring that the curriculum did not contain political bias, being involved in headteacher appointments, and effectively being the employers of school staff (Deem and Davies, 1991). Such moves provoked concern over the encroachment of private investment in education (e.g., Gunter, 2011; Walford, 2014a). Gillard (2018) believed that for the government, LMS served three purposes: it helped to create an 'education market'; it took financial control away from local authorities; and when budgets were cut, schools could be blamed for poor management. With the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (UK Government, 1998), the New Labour government abolished GMS, bringing schools back under LA control. Certain types of schools retained a degree of independence from the LA, such as control over employment in the school, admissions, and school land and assets. Such schools were typically either voluntary-aided schools, which were LA-maintained, usually faith schools, where a charitable organization, such as the Church, contributed to building costs, and was involved in the running of the school; or foundation schools, which were similarly state-funded, but run by a charitable non-faith 'foundation'. In various subsequent New Labour administrations (1997-2010), the continued drive for public-private partnership in education based its narrative around the transformative and innovative effect of their new 'City Academies', which were designed to address socio-economic disadvantage, echoing the CTCs of the Conservatives in the 1980s. In addition, the 2000s saw the rapid development of trust schools, where schools could maintain state-funded status, whilst being supported by a charitable trust. The charity's trust board held the school's assets on trust for the school, and like GMS schools, the LGB controlled admission arrangements and employed the staff. Unions with staff employed in schools raised their concerns with this charitable trust model of education, warning of the potential dangers for staff if a business-dominated charitable trust assumed majority control of the governing body (Unison, 2009).

Under a new Coalition Government, the Academies Act 2010 (UK Government, 2010), introduced 'converter' academies, initially designed to give high-performing local authority-maintained schools in England the right to convert to academy status. These academies were state funded by the central government, but no longer within LA control.

These ambitions accelerated, and within six years, the intention to create a nationwide compulsory education system independent of local control was manifested in the Government White Paper, which proposed ‘a school-led system with every school an academy’ (DfE, 2016a:53). The White Paper stated a further move to detach schools from LA control, by setting out plans for all academies to belong to a MAT, which would enable chains of schools, including in some cases non-statutory pre-schools and sixth-forms, to be formed with a single-funding agreement with the Secretary of State. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, this policy has been reiterated more recently in 2021 and 2022, by Conservative administrations, seeking to ensure that LA control of schools is replaced by ‘strong trusts’ which would be ‘held accountable to a set of clear roles and responsibilities’ (DfE, 2022:43).

1.4 Academic critique of the policy arena

This policy shift has caused alarm amongst critics over the resultant reduced levels of public scrutiny. In addition to Gunter’s (2011:12) warning of a ‘democratic deficit’ through the absence of oversight by locally-elected representatives, Ball (2012b) has argued that the move towards central control of education policy-making has led to the marginalisation of traditional community-based policy makers. Simkins et al (2015) have expressed concern over the LA’s increasingly limited role in a landscape where MATs are achieving dominance. There are misgivings that the ethos and values of the MAT-lead academies programme are in competition, not harmony with those of education as a public good. Apple (2006) warns that, under the neo-liberal agenda, education needs to become a marketable and measurable commodity, which will confer legitimacy. Ball (2012b:140) acknowledges that market logics have now effectively been ‘naturalised’ within the education model, and that the question which must be addressed is how tightly or loosely education institutions are regulated. He observes that ‘new knowledge brokers’ are at work within the education system, whose motives include enhancing the competitive advantage of their institution, as if it were a business, which may not be aligned with public interest.

With such concerns, there is a growing corpus of literature (Gibton, 2017; Glatter, 2017; Greany and Higham, 2018; Hatcher, 2014) which raises the legitimacy of these new educational institutions as an area for examination. Tinker (2015:11) proposes that

publicly funded schools, which academies and their MATs are, should be considered as 'public interest institutions', operating on a principle of 'shared ownership', and that for them to operate legitimately, all stakeholders (including parents) must be involved in inclusive and democratic forms of decision-making. Likewise, Wilkins (2012:22) has argued for 'participative accountability' (i.e., accountability to a range of stake-holders from teachers, governors, pupils, parents and community members) within schools. This is especially apposite, given the new (and often-reported opaque) relations between trust boards and members, and the local academy community. Stoker (1998) identified a model of governance where boundaries and responsibilities are blurred, such as that typically found in MATs, as creating uncertainty and ambiguity about who is responsible and for what. He claims that to gain public support and to be seen as legitimate, those holding power must have their responsibilities clearly delineated and made public. As Tinker (2015:11) warned, with power and accountability now resting within a small group of appointed, rather than elected individuals, there is doubt over how much of a 'sense of belonging and control' academy staff, governors and parents have over their own schools. For academy leaders who may have previously been autonomous heads of their own school under the LA-maintained system with an agentic role in policy formation, they are now grappling with the complexities of being held to account for their own academy yet relinquishing ultimate power to an executive principal above them, or the CEO of the MAT. The situation is similar for local governors, whose power and policy-making remit within their own academy has typically been assumed by the central MAT.

1.5 The contribution of this research study

At present, current data shows that there are 2,539 trusts (a combination of single-academy trusts -SATs, and MATs), made up of nearly 10,000 schools, out of a total of over 27,500 schools in England (FFT Education Data Lab, 2022). One fifth of schools are part of a MAT of ten or more schools: with the Government pushing for a system led by 'strong trusts' with ten or more academies, it is important for the impact of such systemic change to be explored at a micro level. As stated in Section 1.1, this phenomenological study aims to add to the body of research on academisation, noted in Section 1.4, by seeking to understand and document the experiences of those working, governing, managing and otherwise involved in MATs, which in turn will offer fresh insight for individuals tasked

with the responsibility of expansion, at national and local policy level. Unlike previous studies, this study has taken into consideration a wide range of stakeholders over multiple sites to specifically explore autonomy, agency and legitimacy in relation to the structures of governance and accountability adopted by MATs. The study examines how the new governance and accountability structures of the MAT system were understood and experienced by different stakeholders within four MATs, from those in the highest positions of power, to those with very little voice in the workings of the organisation. It explores how such changes have affected professional autonomy and agency at the local level, and how these factors have contributed to the MATs' claims to legitimacy. It thus adds empirical evidence to previously expressed fears by Tinker et al (2015) in relation to participants' sense of belonging and control; to Greany and Higham's (2018) reservations about the legitimacy of these organisations; and to Wilkins' conception of participative accountability. Three research questions have framed the inquiry:

Research Question One (RQ1): What does governance and accountability mean to those involved in MATs, and what are the practical implications for individuals?

Research Question Two (RQ2): What are the implications for those in positions of local leadership and local governance, in terms of autonomy and agency?

Research Question Three (RQ3): What does legitimacy look like for MATs?

The findings and conclusions of this study are aimed to support policy-makers and practitioners in the decisions they will need to take in the unfolding education landscape.

1.6 Empirical Research

With the purpose of gaining a deep understanding of individuals' experiences, the study was framed within a phenomenological-interpretivist/constructivist approach. In addition, my examination of how these experiences were framed and interpreted by contextual factors and policy implementation, guided me to also use critical social policy enactment theory. Using qualitative methods, between 2017 and 2020 over two phases, 54 individuals were interviewed within 23 interviews/focus groups, across four MATs in England, each at a different stage of its development, but each also at a point of transition. One was a medium-sized MAT operating across three boroughs, with plans to expand rapidly up to around 20 academies, including nursery, primary and secondary.

Another was a small, well-established MAT operating in just one borough, and having recently taken on a new academy had no immediate plans for expansion. Another was a Church of England (CofE) trust, recently formed, and whilst operating within one borough, had recently taken on a school of a very different demographic nature to its existing two academies. The fourth MAT was newly formed from its original Special School, and at the time of interviewing in Phase 1 had only the founding school, but by Phase 2, had acquired a second (non-Special) school.

Interpretivism assumes multiple, and sometimes conflicting social realities, being constructed through the meanings and understandings which people develop socially and experientially (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Through the mode of intimate, often one-to-one interviews with individuals at the top level of management and governance, afforded by the phenomenological approach, by 'growing quiet and listening' (Moustakas, 1994:63), I was able to explore the reasoning behind the adoption of the new schemes of governance and accountability, and the impact these individuals believed it had had on other stakeholders. Also, by offering local governors, non-managerial staff and parents the opportunity to talk frankly and confidentially about their experiences, hopes and fears of the new system, I was able to capture how changes in governance and accountability arrangements had been experienced at a more local level, where voices are not so powerful, and the perceived impact on individual's sense of autonomy and agency.

The longitudinal nature of the study has been a significant contribution to established research in this area. Through repeated visits over four years (either interviewing different individuals or returning to the same participant), I was able to spend considerable time in the field, and to include a wide range of participants at varying levels of power, from CEOs to parents. This facilitated a multi-level, thematic analysis, which supported the theoretical framework of the research (e.g., Braun and Clarke, 2006), and where different perspectives could be placed alongside each other in an attempt to understand the context of the experiences of those involved in MATs, whatever their influence or position. This has resulted in a rich collection of interpretations and understandings of the issues embodied in the research questions and has given a voice to those influenced by being part of a MAT. It has also signified the importance of

practitioners and academics working together to jointly reflect on what it means for education to be increasingly taken out of public scrutiny.

My positionality as researcher in the study has had to be considered. Through my own professional experience in the education world, I shared or understood many of the experiences of participants, and had views on the academisation of English schools. Equally, I needed to hear personal experiences and respond and record these robustly. I therefore sought to tread a path between van Manen (1990; 2014)'s 'bracketing out' or 'epoche' of my own experiences and thoughts, and placing myself as critical secretary who was able to 'come down from the balcony' (Apple, 2013:43; Rowley, 2014:52) of impartial observer to allow the opportunity for participants in the study to 'talk back' (Rowley, *op. cit.*). My prior experience enabled me to use Bottery's (2003) conceptual tools on trust, risk and vulnerability, allowing me to build trust and empathy with the participants, resulting in the collection of intricately textured narratives, which forms the essence of this study.

1.7 Overview of the thesis

Chapter 2 presents a review of literature implicit to the study and the research questions. This includes: the reconfiguration of the public/power relationships in state education; the new form of school governance in England, focusing on the shift away from local to centralised control; accountability and decision-making within the new education policy landscape; the implications for the legitimacy of schools within this new arena, and the consequences for school-leaders' autonomy and agency, in a system promising 'new freedoms'; and the importance of collaboration and trusting relationships.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology of this study, including a justification for the approach taken. It shows how the theoretical framework, with its combination of interpretivist/constructivist phenomenology and policy enactment theory supported the research questions, and determined the methods used. It describes the four research sites, how the research was conducted, and the thematic approach to data analysis. It also critiques the integrity of the research, the ethical framework and my positionality as researcher. The chapter concludes with an evaluation of the methodology.

Chapter 4 presents the findings organised around four key themes, identified through examination of the data. These are: systems and lines of governance and accountability; marginalisation of the local voice in governance, and implications for autonomy and agency; academy leaders balancing central control with professional autonomy and the importance of building relationships and developing trust; and what legitimacy looks like for those involved in MATs.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present an examination and discussion of the data, together with the literature presented in Chapters 2 and 3, in relation to each of the research questions. Chapter 5 focuses on RQ1: 'What does governance and accountability mean to those involved in MATs, and what are the practical implications for individuals?' Chapter 6 focuses on RQ2: 'The implications of the new governance and accountability structures for those in positions of local leadership and local governance, in terms of autonomy and agency'. Chapter 7 completes this section, focusing on RQ3: 'What does legitimacy look like for MATs?'.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis and is discussed below.

1.8 The importance of this study to policy, practice, and academic work

Chapter 8 draws together key messages from the analysis, addressing the research questions, and reflecting on the methodology in relation to the findings and discussion. In brief, in addressing RQs1 and 2, the study found marked differences in experiences of governance and accountability, with the most negative impact on local governors, in terms of status, professional autonomy and agency. Whilst academy leaders also experienced a loss in autonomy, this was compensated for by the 'wrap around support' of the MAT and inter-academy collegiality. In terms of local involvement, the study found that the central, hierarchical governance and upward accountability structures left little place for debate and airing of local concerns, resulting in the marginalisation of the local voice. In addressing RQ3, the study has identified the fragility of the legitimacy of these MATs, with doubts over their pluralistic representation and appropriate expertise. Based on the conclusions, a number of policy and practice recommendations are made, including a review of how autonomy, agency and democratic representation at academy

level can be restored; and the implementation of a transparent structure and procedure for holding MATs to account by their academy communities. There is also a call to scholars and practitioners to challenge the neo-liberal narrative running through national education policy, through joint working between academics and school colleagues, in order to open up the spaces for those who feel they do not have a voice (e.g., Apple, 2013), or that their views are not valued. In this way, this study is calling for a turn of the tide, against the values and practices enshrined in neo-liberalism within our education system. It acknowledges the work of Apple (2013) and Fielding (2009; 2011) by showing how a more hopeful alternative can be conceived by including and valuing the voices, aspirations and fears of people affected by, but not necessarily agentic, in systemic education change.

Chapter 2 will now review and discuss in detail literature relevant to the study, and which formed the basis for my research questions and subsequent focus.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This study has drawn on the significant body of existing literature and research on governance, accountability, autonomy, legitimacy and trust, both in education, and also in the wider sphere of social policy, and examines the evidence of a number of pertinent themes. First, Section 2.2 looks at the reconfiguration of the public/private power relationships in state education. Drawing on the work of social and educational policy researchers, in particular Ball (2012b), Gunter (2011; 2016.), Hargreaves and Ainscow (2015) and Simkins et al (2015), it shows how various government initiatives over the past few decades have helped to form and justify the current English Academies Programme.

Section 2.3 documents the new form of governance which multi-academy trusts (MATs) subsequently require, signalling a shift in relationships between the locally-governed school, to that of a more central governing trust board. Here, I draw on the important work of Ball and Junemann (2012), Clarke (2009), Gunter (2011), Newman and Clarke (2009), Stoker (1998), Tinker (2015), Wilkins (2015) and Wilkins and Gobby (2020) to present an analysis and critique of different forms of education governance, and the implication for stakeholders within the new system.

Section 2.4 explores further the research on democracy and accountability within the new policy landscape, drawing on Hooge et al's (2012) model of school accountability. It examines the concerns over the lack of transparency in the new accountability systems, and despite the talk of new 'freedoms', the discouragement of dissent amongst stakeholder voices (e.g., Gunter and McGinty, 2014; Wilkins, 2012), and the resulting 'democratic deficit (Gunter, 2011).

Section 2.5 presents research on the implications of the MAT structure and governance for the autonomy and leadership of school leaders and other stakeholders within a MAT. The literature suggests there may be a danger of a 'patterned sense of superiority and subordination' (Coldron et al, 2015:681) emerging between CEOs of MATs and head teachers, and also amongst head teachers within a MAT. It also looks at the concept of the 'legitimate school leader' (Ringen 2013), and what factors may contribute to the shaping of agency and role identity.

Section 2.6 examines the evidence on the importance of collaboration and trust in multi-networked organisations. The connection between accountability and trust (e.g., Carless, 2009), reciprocity of work (Tschannen-Moran, 2001), and openness and honesty (Fukuyama, 1996) are acknowledged, along with the important role of collaboration between participants and respect for each other's views (e.g., Tinker, 2015). The final part of this section reviews research on recognising, using and valuing the 'professional knowledge' and 'collective wisdom' of all stakeholders within an organisation (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015). This is a vital component for building shared cultures and a commitment to the MAT's values amongst its stakeholders (e.g., Hargreaves, 2012), and which is likely to contribute to claims of legitimacy.

2.2 A reconfiguration of the public/private power relationships in state education

2.2.1 The Academies Programme: a product of neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideological influences in education policy

Since the early 1980s, the education system in England has undergone a series of significant changes. These have often been a reflection of the overarching political discourses of the time, where the dominant ideology has drawn upon the principles of both neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism. The neo-liberalism influences emphasise an orientation to the future, constant adaptation to new circumstance and an absence of state control: the neo-conservative influences stress an orientation to the past, traditional values and collective loyalties (e.g., Ball, 2012b). Recent administrations (in both the UK and US) have drawn on the two ideologies, often in co-existence, a situation which Apple (2006:192) argues has created a distrust of the state, resulting in many people no longer regarding it as the 'legitimate and neutral upholder of the public good'. In England, Thatcher's Conservative government in the 1980s, was both responding to, and actively promoting, capitalist development, and seeking to reduce state control of public services. Since then, various Education Acts have sought to introduce more centralisation and standardisation through a system of national curriculum and assessment, and an inspection system (Ofsted). Ball (2012b) has argued that this central control of education policy-making has led to the marginalisation of traditional community-based policy-makers.

The Academies Programme has its origins in the City Technology Colleges (CTCs) initiative of the 1980s, which many saw as the beginnings of the blurring of lines between public and private investment in education (e.g., Gunter, 2011; Walford, 2014a), particularly with its emphasis on the local authority (LA) system failing children. In the New Labour administrations (1997-2010), the language used was very much around a vision of ‘transformation’ of the education system, with under-performance, radical, innovative ideas and the preparation for the world of work being key themes; theirs was a new form of education based on creative risk-taking, innovative entrepreneurial and ‘personalised’ in response to ‘consumer’ needs (Clarke et al, 2007:45-46).

The New Labour government presented the private-public partnership of newly-termed ‘City Academies’ within a market-driven philanthropic framework to address socio-economic disadvantage, much as the Conservatives had done with CTCs, with the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, announcing the Government’s Academies Programme in 2000:

‘My vision is one of excellence and diversity[...]' (Blunkett, 2000a);

‘City Academies will create new opportunities for business, the voluntary sector and central and local government to work together to break [the cycle of inequality of opportunity and disadvantage] and improve life chances for inner-city children’ (Blunkett 2000b).

New Labour introduced a system where City Academies (re-named ‘academies’ in the 2002 Education Act) would not solely be controlled by the Local Authority, but would have sponsors from ‘voluntary, religious or business sectors’ (Blunkett, 2000a). These sponsors would have control over the following: the composition of the governing body; leadership and management structures and appointments; pay and conditions of staff; disapplication from parts of the national curriculum; structure of the school day; and some control over school admissions (Gunter, 2011). Funding was direct from the DfES/DCSF, for sponsors ‘to allocate as they think appropriate, with no intermediaries [i.e., Local Authorities] taking a top slice on the way’ (Adonis, 2007:np). The State’s role in education, was now, effectively, one of administration: more ‘gamekeeper’ than ‘gardener’ (Urry, 2000:186). This early model of academy sponsorship focused on

improving 'failing' schools, where a charitable trust, headed by a CEO and board of trustees, was deemed more appropriate than the Local Authority in making improvements. Such schools ('sponsored academies') had no choice but to leave LA-control and join a trust approved by the DfES/DCSF, who would use their powers to ensure such a move was enacted:

'We will use legislative powers available to us nationally to enable alternative providers to take over the management of failing and underperforming state sector schools or replace them with the new city academies' (Blunkett, 2000a).

Perhaps because of the apparent heavy-handed and authoritative nature of the Government's approach, some feared that traditional social democratic commitments to equality of opportunity and access and citizen participation were beginning to be seen as 'unrealistic', 'unproductive' and 'too costly' (Gewirtz, 2002). Indeed, some believed that those not part of the vision were the subject of 'institutionalised shaming' (Wettlaufer, 2015:39).

It is useful here to examine the structure and remit of the different types of trusts, which were effectively the precursors of multi-academy trusts, examined in this study. The structure of sponsored academies, with their centralised powers and over-arching trust board, could be seen as a form of 'hard governance federations', established under the Education Act 2002 (Section 24). Such federations were typically formed for strong schools to support weaker schools through a central mandate, had a statutory single governing body over all its schools, and shared common goals through a Service Level Agreement (SLA) and protocol. There was no requirement for individual schools to have their own governing body, and one executive headteacher could lead more than one school. Converter academies, on the other hand, introduced in 2010 by the Coalition government, and discussed below, could be aligned with the model of 'soft governance federations' (Education Act, 2002, Section 26), where a small number of schools worked together, each school maintaining its own governing body, with the federation having a joint governance/strategic committee with delegated powers. Chapman et al (2010) identified two further models of 'federations', both of which were non-statutory, where individual schools had greater powers of independence and autonomy. First, a 'soft federation', where each school continued to have its own governing body, but whilst the

federation had joint governance with a strategic committee, it had no delegated powers. The final type, termed by Chapman et al (2010:70) as a 'loose collaboration', was where a group of schools shared common goals, and met informally ad hoc for a particular purpose. The 'hard governance federations' were more likely to be prescriptive about adherence to operational procedures in terms of teaching, learning and assessment, whilst the 'softer' collaborations might be less so.

2.2.2 MATs presented as an innovative alternative to local authority bureaucracy and under-performance

In 2010 there was a new Coalition Government (Conservatives and Liberal Democrats), which, through the Academies Act 2010 (UK Government, 2010), introduced the concept of converter academies, the focus being on school improvement and bestowing greater freedom and autonomy on schools, as former Prime Minister David Cameron stated:

'Improving education is central to our reform agenda and we are committed to giving governors, headteachers and teachers more control over how they run their schools. We know they are best placed to decide how to give their pupils the best possible education and that is why we are encouraging more schools to become academies' (David Cameron, 2010).

This was encapsulated in the Coalition's first Schools White Paper, under the stewardship of Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education:

'We want every school to be able to shape its own character, frame its own ethos and develop its own specialisms, free of either central or local bureaucratic constraint. It is our ambition, therefore, to help every school which wishes to enjoy greater freedom to achieve Academy status [...] Our direction of travel is towards schools as autonomous institutions collaborating with each other on terms set by teachers, not bureaucrats.' (DfE, 2010, pp11-12)

Alongside this promise of a culture of freedom for academy conversion - including freedom from budget restraints to freedom from following the national curriculum - the Coalition set up the Free Schools Policy. This was designed to

'support – not turn away – teachers, charities, parent groups and others who have the vision and drive to open Free Schools in response to parental demand,

especially in areas of deprivation where there is significant dissatisfaction with the choices available.’ (DfE, 2010, p52)

Thus, the emphasis throughout the 2010 White Paper was on single schools converting (or being forced to convert) to academies, with sponsors stepping in where schools were deemed to be failing, or on single new Free schools being built at the behest of parental demand. However, despite sponsorship initially being seen as an interventionist model, national sponsors, such as ARK, United Learning Trust, Oasis and Harris (referred to variously as Academy ‘chains’, ‘multi-school trusts’, and ‘federations’ in the White Paper), were lauded by the Coalition Government for providing rapid school improvement, amid Government claims that pupil results were better for academies belonging to a ‘chain’, than those not:

‘Schools working together leads to better results. Some sponsors already oversee several Academies in a geographical group, or chains of Academies across the country, and already seven organisations sponsor six or more Academies. These chains can support schools to improve more rapidly – by providing a common approach to professional development, sharing effective practice, and providing shared ‘back-office’ support. Along with our best schools, we will encourage strong and experienced sponsors to play a leadership role in driving the improvement of the whole school system, including through leading more formal federations and chains.’ (DfE, 2010, p57).

Using Bacchi’s (2012:21) ‘What’s the problem represented to be?’ approach, the ‘problem’ that ‘chains’ or ‘multi-school trusts’ hoped to address was, according to successive governments, poor standards in schools and a bureaucratic local government management system which stifled creativity and was far-removed from key players in schools. However, Gunter (2016:185) suggests that whilst public education needed reform, a crisis ‘was constructed and fabricated to attack, dismantle and replace it’, which was more concerned with corporate interests, rather than reform for and with the public. School leaders and LA officials who may have initially expressed concern at this limited vision of education ‘reform’ with its overtones of market values, were increasingly seen to buy into these new metrics for successful education, perhaps because they had had a change of mind, or maybe for fear of being left behind, looking old-fashioned, with out-

dated and erroneous principles. In some cases, LAs, perhaps despite their reservations, would support the opening of academies in order to help ensure sufficient school places (Simkins et al, 2015). There was also the possibility that in order to address the social and economic issues within their communities, some LAs would be obliged to draw on the resources of other players in the private and voluntary sectors (Stoker, 1998).

By 2016, the Conservative Government's policy, stated in the Education and Adoption Act White Paper was for:

'A school-led system with every school an academy, empowered pupils, parents and communities and a clearly defined role for local government' (DfE, 2016a:53).

There was now an expectation that most schools would join a trust chain, or the now accepted term, multi-academy trust (MAT), as the Government claimed that:

'MATs are the only structures which formally bring together leadership, autonomy, funding and accountability across a group of academies in an enduring way, and are the best long term formal arrangement for stronger schools to support the improvement of weaker schools' (DfE, 2016a:57).

This was despite concerns about limited evidence on the efficacy of the MAT-model (e.g., Greany and Ehren, 2016; Hutchings et al, 2015). Greany and Ehren (2016), responding to the 2016 White Paper, described the rapid pace of development of the MAT-led Academies Programme, as:

"Designing in flight", both for individual trusts and for the sector as a whole, which can create incoherence, uncertainty and risk' (Greany and Ehren, 2016:4).

They raised specific concerns about the threat to the legitimacy of MATs, in the eyes of parents and the public, due to conflicts of interest, over-expansion and lack of parental and democratic involvement. They also warned of the dangers of fragmentation, where 'some schools thrive but others fail' (Greany and Ehren, 2016:2), and highlighted the need for clear accountability systems for MATs. The DfE itself recognised the need for greater national and regional regulation and oversight of MATs, with its clear outline for the role of Regional School Commissioner (RSC) (DfE, 2016b)

The move to wholesale academisation with MATs at the centre as the norm, rather than an interventionist model, has been reiterated more recently by successive Education Secretaries. First, in 2021 where there was a statement that ‘the Government’s vision is for every school to be part of a family of schools in a strong multi academy trust’, justifying it thus:

‘Our ambition is for more schools to benefit from being part of a strong family because multi-academy trusts are the best way to advance education for the public benefit and can deliver clear benefits for teaching and pupil outcomes.’

(Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education, 2021:n.p.).

Then a year later, when it was clear the government’s intention was to continue with this policy as stated in the 2022 White Paper, it was the expectation that by 2030 all schools would be part of a ‘strong multi-academy trust’ (DfE, 2022).

Simkins et al (2015) have expressed concern over the LA’s limited role in this new policy landscape, including their ability to prevent fragmentation of the local school system (previewing Greany and Ehren’s (2016) warning a year later), when MATs take on schools across boroughs. With the removal of ‘that strong mediating layer’ of the LA, which by definition, is local, some feel that this poses the danger of a ‘crisis of legitimacy’ (Glatter, 2013:n.p.).

[2.2.3 MATs seen as a collaborative partnership of schools responding to local need](#)
In a critique of the Greater Manchester Challenge (GMC) (initiated by the UK government in 2007), Ainscow recommends a ‘leading from the middle’ approach, which, although applied to LAs in England, could be the model for other networks and partnerships, including MATs (Hargreaves and Ainscow, 2015). If we see MATs as the new LAs, then ‘leading from the middle’ means these organisations become the ‘collective drivers of change and improvement’, with their schools working together to achieve this, and ‘exercising initiative, rather than implementing other people’s’ (Hargreaves and Ainscow, 2015:44). They found that key to collaboration was school-to-school support, with for example, hub schools with a particular specialism providing training and development on good practice. This was not without its problems: in the GMC, ‘old rivalries’ had to be overcome; and on occasions, despite the language of new shared responsibility being

adopted, there was no real change in practice. However, Hargreaves notes that the special education reform programme in Ontario, Canada, created a move away from a generic response to centralized reform strategy, towards a system which ‘generated and galvanized local creativity and energy in order to respond flexibly to local needs and circumstances’ (Hargreaves and Ainscow, 2015:47). It is possible that MATs are well-placed to provide a local supporting framework to promote an opportunity for creativity, and enthusiasts of academisation use such evidence to support their approaches to reform. Proponents of New Right think tanks welcomed the academies programme, as it was seen as the embodiment of rolling back the state in national education. Toby Young, former Director of the New Schools Network, a charitable trust to support groups setting up Free schools, stated: ‘I’m a fan of the academies policy because it reduces the involvement of politicians and bureaucrats in taxpayer-funded education’ (Young, 2016). However, research by Lubienski (2014) and Greany (2020) on the centralisation/decentralisation of the school system, and the re-shaping of the ‘middle tier’ of governance and control has led to further questions about the replacement of the locally-based ‘meso-level’ of education administration, namely local authorities, by either single, autonomous academies or multi-academy trusts. Lubienski (2014:424) uses the term ‘disintermediation’ to describe the ‘withdrawal of power and influence from intermediate or “meso-level” educational authorities that operate between local schools and national entities’. In his examination of ‘disintermediation’ within the education reforms of the USA and New Zealand, Lubienski seeks to draw lessons for England, and whilst he acknowledges societal, political and cultural differences across nations, he sounds the warning that:

‘policymakers in any nation should balance their interest in reforms from overseas with an interest in the research on the outcomes of those reforms’ (Lubienski, 2014:431).

The outcomes that he found in the USA and New Zealand did not reflect the anticipated transformation in education claimed by the proponents of the disempowerment of the ‘middle tier’:

‘As meso-level institutions of public governance have been diminished through disintermediation processes, private, more market-oriented interests and institutions have not proven any more adept at addressing equity concerns, and may instead be less well-suited for these objectives. In view of that mediocre record of these reforms, the most apparent, and perhaps the most important, results are not in improved equity or effectiveness, but in terms of the transformations we are seeing in which groups control education’ (Lubienski, 2014:435).

In the paradox of the centralisation/decentralisation debate, Lubienski noted that education policy-making powers were being transferred from elected boards who represented their local communities, to unelected individuals, who:

‘laud the virtues of de-centralisation, yet often serve as conduits of centralising forces, but [...] to the private, rather than the public sphere’ (Lubienski: 433-434).

This reflects Ozga’s (2009:150) observation, in her study of the role of data in education governance, that:

‘We see the governance turn as a shift in strategy that is highly dependent on the appearance of deregulation, but that is equally marked by strong central steering through various policy technologies.’

Greany’s (2020) research, drawing on path-dependency and governance theories, through the use of five LA vignettes, looked at how the ‘middle tier’ were responding to centralisation/decentralisation and disintermediation. He found that the introduction of MATs had resulted in a more fragmented school system, and had made ‘place-based’ oversight less coherent, with a call for LAs to develop ‘boundary-spanning’ and ‘scale-craft’ skills (p263). Greany suggests that, rather than stepping back from local control, by using network and community forms of governance LAs could use their influence to shape a collective commitment to a shared local identity and a set of rules. In this way, Greany (2020:263) argues, LAs could ‘bind diverse stakeholders together’ to achieve their place-based vision. Within this rapid (re)development of the ‘middle tier’, prompted by the Academies Programme, Greany concludes with a call for further research:

‘particularly the issue of how macro governance processes play out in local practice and the impact this has on outcomes as well as equity and legitimacy in contemporary public services’ (Greany, 2020:264).

2.2.4 Distrust of political bodies: paving the way for non-elected governance and management of schools

This antagonism towards the influence of politicians, particularly at a local level has been challenged on the basis that such an approach has led to less robust scrutiny of the processes involved, and to weakened democratic processes, effectively leaving the English education system in the hands of a non-elected, privatised ‘elite’. Gunter and McGinty (2014:312), in applying an Arendtian analysis to the academy conversion process, argue that this drive to put private bodies in charge of our public education system, with its narrative of ‘we must do something about urban education’, is in fact a thinly-veiled disguise for the desire to produce a workforce ‘capable of complying with our profit and missionary motives’, and stifling debate. Similarly, Wilkins and Olmedo (2019) have noted the gradual move to prefer consensus on school governing boards, with little appetite for ‘dissensus’. Rose and Miller (2010:296) claim that within a nation’s citizens, neo-liberalism encourages ‘scepticism over the capacities of political authorities to govern everything for the best’. LAs could thus be seen as these political authorities, over which citizens are encouraged to be ‘vigilant’ over its attempt to govern (Rose and Miller, 2010:296). Rose and Miller point out the paradox, that within this system, non-democratic, autonomous actors have emerged, such as commercial concerns and individuals, who are relatively free to go about their business, unchallenged, ‘making their own decisions and controlling their own destinies’ (Rose and Miller, 2010:296). However, whilst it has been generally acknowledged that MAT trust boards now adopt the responsibilities formerly held by LAs, with this, they have also taken on board all the concomitant ‘risks and their attendant calculations and moral hazards’ that this brings (Wilkins 2019:13).

Given that much of the drive of the Academies Programme was to create an autonomous education landscape, it is somewhat ironic that the education reforms of the Coalition and Conservative governments (2010-2015, 2015-2022 respectively), whilst reducing the oversight powers of LAs, and shifting that responsibility to individual autonomous

organisations, centralisation of authority is stronger than it has been for some time. For state-controlled schools, this authority rests with central government: Tinker claims that

‘today the Secretary of State for Education [...] wields more powers than any in recent history to intervene in the day to day running of schools’ (Tinker, 2015:19).

For academies within a MAT, this centralised authority is likely to rest within the trust board, the new seat of governance and accountability. Within this context, Section 2.3 reviews how the Academies Programme has affected the balance in school governance, and the impact on power relations.

2.3 A new form of school governance: a shift away from local to centralised control

2.3.1 An opportunity to include multiple voices, or a professionalisation of governance?

Wilkins and Gobby (2020:311) define governance as ‘the ways in which government and non-government entities intervene, both formally and informally, to shape the way organisations and individuals conduct themselves’. They pose that such interventions are designed to facilitate change (e.g., individual behaviour or organisational structure) or limit the opportunities of change in order to maintain the status quo. In either case, they argue that the purpose of governance should be to ‘improve conditions by which change can be affected or limited to serve different political, economic and environmental aims’ (Wilkins and Gobby, 2020:311). Presented as an alternative to traditional national or even local top-down government, they see governance as offering a ‘bottom-up’ approach, which, they suggest somewhat sceptically, is ‘often celebrated within policy documents and political speeches as levers for community empowerment and downward accountability’ (Wilkins and Gobby, 2020:314). In this model, the voices of multiple stakeholders prevail, rather than formal committees and authorities with ‘vested interests’. Reflecting the move towards the ‘multiple stakeholder’ and participative governance models, Ball (2009) sees new forms of educational governance as ‘heterarchies’, representing:

‘a new mix of hierarchy, market and network which is replete with overlap, multiplicity, mixed ascendancy, and/or divergent but co-existent patterns of relations’ (Ball, 2009:100).

This mix of approaches, identified by Ball, perhaps foreshadows the confusion over the prevailing values within the education organisation, and whose voices and values matter most. In their analysis of public sector transformation, Ball and Junemann (2012) identify a new narrative around values and modes enshrined in entrepreneurship and competitiveness, which are legitimised and given moral authority. According to Lord Nash, Schools Minister, addressing the Independent Academies Association in 2013,

‘running a school is in many ways like running a business, so we need more business people coming forward to become governors’ (Nash, 2013:n.p.).

With the trend for the head of a MAT to be termed ‘CEO’, this could be a further indicator that MATs are modelling their roles on private enterprise (Gobby, 2013). Meanwhile, according to Salokangas and Chapman (2014:383), within this ‘blurred field’ of local school governance there will be ‘a wide range of actors with competing visions and values’, with the danger of previous values and norms being ‘diminished or derided’ (Ball and Junemann, 2012:24), and with this, comes the danger of ‘values drift’ (Wilkins and Gobby, 2020:320). How far this diminishing or ‘drift’ of educational values is perceived to be evident in MATs, and if so, its implications, should be a matter of concern, and one which this study explores.

In contrast to Wilkins and Gobby, and Ball, the UK Conservative Government’s view of governance within MATs, expressed in its 2016 White Paper, appeared to be two-tier and hierarchical: the skilled professionals on the trust boards responsible for overarching, strategic work across its academies, with the local governing boards (LGBs) being answerable to them, with limited powers and responsibilities:

‘As fewer, more highly skilled boards take more strategic oversight of the trust’s schools, MAT boards will increasingly use professionals to hold individual-level heads to account for educational standards and the professional management of the school, allowing school-level boards to focus on understanding and championing the needs of pupils, parents and the wider local community’.

With this focus on unspecified ‘professionals’ holding educators to account, Saward (2005)’s misgivings are pertinent. He regards one of the key issues around contemporary governance being how a range of actors and institutions which are not elected are given authority to exercise political power.

2.3.2 The impact of centralised governance on local governance and representation

This policy move has clear implications for individual, traditionally-appointed governors, whose key role was indeed to hold school heads to account. In the DfE’s statement above, there is the expectation that it will be the trust-level appointed governors or trustees who will be accountable for strategic decisions affecting individual schools, rather than individual LGBs, resulting in the scope for stakeholder representation among local governors being significantly reduced (e.g., Tinker, 2015). This leaves a question-mark over how this re-positioning, and apparent diminishing of the role of the LGB has affected local governors themselves and their sense of agency: how they are viewed and valued within the MAT community, how they are seen to contribute to education at both school and trust-level, and what skills they are expected to bring to the new education landscape of the MAT.

However, this picture is somewhat paradoxical, with a lack of clarity over the skills and expertise required at the LGB level, and could reflect the rapidly-changing national policies. Wilkins (2015:195) identified a shift in the culture of local governance in academies to a ‘risk-prepared, professionalized culture’, with business values being the driving force. Contrary to the implications in the DfE’s statement, that local governors would no longer be expected to perform the more ‘serious’ aspect of school governance, Wilkins argues that governors are now expected to possess ‘hard skills’, such as technical expertise or specialist knowledge. Skills of finance, law and accounting seem to be particularly valued, as they would in a business model of governance (Wilkins, 2015). With this comes an increased pressure of responsibility to the funders and to Ofsted. These new skills of accountability come at the expense of more traditional qualities, such as lay and tacit knowledge. Clarke (2009:38), writing before the Academies Programme developed into its current form, was concerned that governors possessing these latter skills ‘may find themselves marginalised in the “business of governance”’. This

professionalisation of LGBs would be rather ironic, given the lessening of powers and accountability implicit in the Government's view of school governors. Wilkins (2015:196) noted that this move for governing bodies to professionalize their members appeared to be starting to affect relations between governors, 'creating antagonism and tension where before it may not have existed'. He suggested that some governors in this new landscape were starting to feel inferior or superior to others, with a weak/strong divide emerging:

'Weak school governors are positioned through a deficit discourse which views civic or lay knowledge as either impractical or inexpedient to the task of ensuring the school is fit for purpose as an administratively self-governing institution.'

(Wilkins, 2015:194).

One would expect that for local governors to fulfil the new expectation of 'understanding and championing the needs of pupils, parents and the wider local community' (DfE, 2016a:para 3.28), then this civic, lay and tacit knowledge would be invaluable. Marquand (2004:143), argues for decisions on public policy to always be taken at the 'lowest practicable level of government', whilst Fullan's (2016:543) three-point solution for system improvement, recommends 'local ownership of the learning agenda'. Wilkins (2013) calls for a new governance system which embraces both specialist and civic or local knowledge, and one which takes account of both managerial and non-managerial aims. However, with legislation brought in by the Coalition Government (2010-2015) to effectively reduce the requirement of parental representation on LGBs from one-third to just two individuals, Tinker (2015:17) has highlighted the imbalance between (elected) parental inclusion in an 'advisory capacity' and (appointed) trustees who have the decision-making powers. Given these concerns, and somewhat contradictory views of the role of both local governors and MAT trustees, it is pertinent to explore the lived experiences of governors at both trust and academy-level, and of parents, as would-be-governors: what skills and experience they feel they bring to the MAT; an understanding of the new lines of accountability; and how the two-tiers of governance position themselves in relation to each other and their schools.

It is relevant here to reflect on how school leaders and the LA viewed the previous big policy shift following the 1988 Education Reform Act. One of the key policies was the Local Management of Schools (LMS), where powers and responsibilities previously held by the LA were dispersed to schools (and also central government and quangos) - specifically devolution of budgets and control over staffing. Radnor and Ball (1995) found that LA impact on school policies and management through representation on governing bodies to be 'limited and indirect' (Radnor and Ball, 1995:3). Neither did headteachers welcome governors who were too active: 'discordant voices are usually unwelcome' (Radnor and Ball, 1995:3), much as Wilkins and Olmedo (2019) identified over two decades later with aversion to 'dissensus'. At the time of Radnor and Ball's research, given the change in the balance of power, continuing good relationships between the LA and schools depended on good personal and professional relations, and an acknowledgement of an 'exchange' agreement: the perception of professional competence at LA level was key in making this work. Within the current policy landscape, it is important to examine where the seat of 'professional competence' is seen to lie, and how far 'good and professional relations' contribute to the competent workings of the MAT.

2.3.3 Different models of governance, and the implications for control and legitimacy

In order to examine the interdependency of governance, autonomy and responsibility, emerging within the new governance of MATs and their academies, it is useful to draw on Newman and Clarke's typology of governance in the public services (Newman and Clarke, 2009), which maps different regimes of governance within the parameters of the degree of central control that is exercised, and the sense of legitimacy generated (Figure 2.1), whilst acknowledging the tensions that can arise between these regimes within an organisation. This is especially apposite, given a recent Secretary of State for Education's view on effective governance models:

'[The MAT's] single governance structure [...] is a more effective model than other examples of collaboration, such as federations and alliances'.

(Williamson, 2021:np).

In their examination of the 're-making' of public services, Newman and Clarke (2009) identify the interplay of power and politics when determining 'public value': politics determines the decision-makers, and power dictates what technologies or strategies are used to decide and measure value. Public value, argue Newman and Clarke, creates the conditions for new forms of agency on the part of managers, stakeholders and the public. Drawing on the work of Hutton (2006), they suggest that legitimacy of public institutions is partly conferred through deliberative democracy, where 'questions of value and purpose are devolved to a plurality of sites and spaces' (Newman and Clarke, 2009:126). One could say that the academies system represents a devolution of such discussions to local sites and spaces, away from the centralised local authority. However, where those local sites were originally intended to be individual academies, the development of the political agenda has given that agency for decision-making and debate to MATs, which have become a proxy for state power.

Newman and Clarke's model identifies four regimes, each drawing on different combinations of forms of power: hierarchical, managerial, network and self-governance. They suggest that organisations find themselves in a 'governance paradox', where their governance regime is likely to be assembled from a range of 'specific technologies, discourses, practices and "empowered" actors' (p127), and will be shaped by an array of pressures towards: efficiency and productivity (managerial governance); enhancing cohesion and collaboration (network governance); performance accountability (hierarchical governance); or co-production with other agencies in the sector (self-governance).

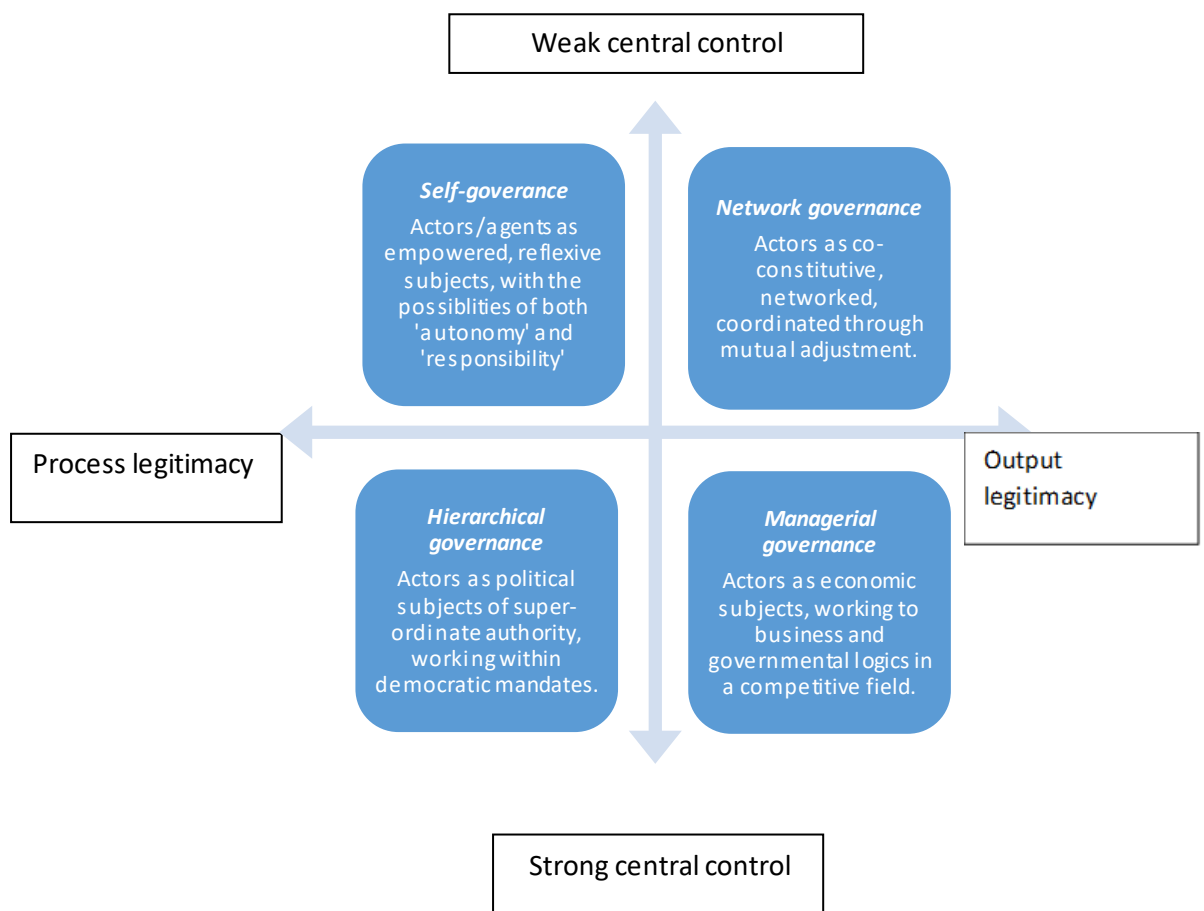


Figure 2.1: Regimes of governance (Newman and Clarke, 2009:128)

Newman and Clarke argue that *hierarchical governance* exercises strong central control through political authority and bureaucratic power, where the members of the organisation are political subjects to the higher controlling authority (a board of directors, chief executive officer, for example). This 'assemblage' of power and authority directs the form of the organisation's relationships, techniques of operation, practices and discourses. Hierarchical governance has connotations of heavy-handed bureaucracy and red-tape, proceduralism, inflexibility and resistance to change. LAs were cast in this style, and to some extent, the Academies Programme was a reaction against that, in the bid for freedom to innovate and change (an indicator of more managerial governance), with expert educationalists in leadership positions, rather than generic administrators (e.g., Ball, 2013). In Newman and Clarke's model, hierarchical regimes are seen to be legitimised through their processes: representative democracy and a requirement for common standards, which ensure accountability, public probity, good governance and

procedural fairness. Claims to representative democracy are dubious, some have argued, as this regime makes it difficult to address the needs of a diverse public. Further criticism points to the regime's lack of capacity for devolution of authority, its inflexible targets, audits and inspections, which all impede efficiency, and thus question any claim to output legitimacy. However, within an education system, there are no tangible outputs to be sold or distributed. Targets, in the form of pupil results could be viewed as both processes and outputs: teachers are constantly working towards targets, but a school is judged on its pupil outcomes (targets translated to results), which in turn has a direct influence on the Ofsted inspection result, which again is both process and output. Within the 'self-improving school-led' system, a hierarchical system of governance could be seen to support the concept of 'winners and losers', where lower-performing schools (measured by pupil outcomes and inspection results) are grouped in the 'losers' category, with the tendency for exclusion from central decision-making, leading to a fragmented network (Greany and Higham, 2018), and with it, a lessening of process legitimacy. Output legitimacy, in the form of successful academies, on the other hand, is what multi-academy trusts will tend to be judged on. To some extent, this is no different to an LA-maintained system: individual schools were judged on, and given legitimacy through their outputs (pupil results, number of students attending university/obtaining employment, etc.), and poorly-performing schools were offered school-improvement support from the LA. The key difference is that for MATs there is an absence of a democratic mandate within the business of governance.

According to Newman and Clarke, *managerial governance*, which maintains the element of strong central control through managerial power forming the organising principle, focuses on competitive survival, with an emphasis on innovation and constant change. It works to business and governmental logics in a competitive field, viewing its staff as economic subjects. However, whilst promising to deliver results in a more cost-effective way, and thus earns its legitimacy through output, the processes it adopts create a sense of temporary change, running the danger of unsettling staff and other 'users', with 'changing name boards' and new logos on their official correspondence, and leaflets promising a new, better service' (Pollitt, 2007:539). Proponents of managerial governance argue that it 'delivers results', creating diversity and choice within its provision. However,

with its competitive emphasis, public value will be subject to cost benefit analysis, and in so doing, it runs the risk of marginalising public interests and values, with an example being the exclusion of 'difficult' pupils (Newman and Clarke, 2009:129).

Network governance, with its weaker central control and legitimacy focus on output rather than process, includes the notion of 'partnership', drawing on the collaboration of multiple stakeholders, and is defined by 'connectedness' (Saward, 2005:194). A number of scholars have recognised the role of the local community in giving network governance its dynamic energy (e.g., Bang and Joergensen, 2007; Sorensen and Torfing, 2006; Stoker, 2011), where local citizens become the 'everyday makers of politics' (Stoker, 2011:27). Stoker (2011:27) suggests that such a community, whilst not being 'easily controlled or directed' is concerned with holding traditional policy makers to account, by ensuring the system is 'fair and effective in solving community problems'. Amongst the drawbacks of network governance, such as the possible danger of 'groupthink' (Mayne and Rieper, 2003), Newman and Clarke warn that the potential inequities within the networks can be problematic, and promote questionable accountability: who is included, whose voice gets heard, and whose contribution and expertise in governance is valued. In earlier work, Newman (2005:134-135) has questioned the agentic role in governance of individuals from the community, seeing participative governance (which could be likened to network governance) 'as a site where tensions over questions of power and legitimacy are played out', doing little to connect government and people. If the Academies Programme aimed to promote this type of governance, then the question over accountability and legitimate voices presents a problem for those involved, with confusion over role-identity and status.

In Newman and Clarke's (2009) view, the *self-governance* regime, with its weak central control and high process legitimacy, promotes 'empowerment', freedom from state bureaucracy and professional paternalism. The 'self' in this regime could be an individual, a community, or a self-governing trust, as is the case in MATs. They point out the potential tensions which could arise within an organisation which holds a variety of governance regimes in addition to self-governance, along with the other ambiguities such as, promising empowerment (for some), but with corresponding new responsibilities which have shifted from the state to the self-governing body. Newman and Clarke are at

pains to point out that it is unlikely that any organisation will operate within only one form of governance, arguing that:

‘Any specific site of practice is likely to be cross-cut by multiple and conflicting regimes of power and competing sources of legitimacy’ (Newman and Clarke, 2009:131);

and that organisations are likely to deploy different sources of legitimacy:

‘playing one form of power off against others as they “flex” organisational, governmental and public resources’ (Newman and Clarke, 2009:131).

It could be argued that the original Academies Programme was an attempt to move away from the hierarchy regime, with its connotations of bureaucratic local government, towards a combination of the other three forms of governance in Newman and Clarke’s model. Gunter (2011) notes that the Academies Programme is based on a rejection of hierarchy, but along with this, she sees the marginalization of self-governance, with its implications of reducing the ability of the local community to hold those in power to account. She is particularly concerned over the democratic implications that this new regime brings. The single academy’s independent status from the LA, coupled with its control by sponsors, has resulted in the local community ‘lacking the power to remove decision-makers at elections’ (Gunter, 2011:14-15). Gunter regards the form of governance that is emerging more a ‘combination of localized within-school managerial power interrelated with sponsor-approved networks’ (Gunter 2011:14-15), which suggests a combination of regimes covering managerial, network and a form of self-governance (albeit centrally regulated). A contrasting view is that of Wilkins’ (2019:10), who argues that the MAT has ‘strengthened rather than weakened hierarchy’ as a mode of education planning and governance, with the apex of that hierarchy being in his view, a ‘cadre of professionals’. Glatter (2013:n.p.) likens the academy model to the governance structure of private schools and sees it as a ‘top-down model [which] allows for minimal engagement on the part of key stakeholders’, when what he says is needed within education governance is a balance between ‘upward, lateral and downward and accountability’.

Taking up the themes raised by Gunter, Wilkins and Glatter, where there is a clear concern for the reduction of democratic accountability in education governance, there is a growing body of literature (Gibton, 2017; Glatter, 2017; Greany and Higham, 2018) which raises 'legitimacy' as an important consideration for the academised system to consider, addressed by Newman and Clarke in their 'process'/'output' elements of legitimacy. Some would say that local governance structures operating as part of the introduction of MATs mean that schools are moving further away from being conceived as public interest institutions, based on inclusive and democratic forms of decision-making (e.g., Glatter, 2017; Tinker, 2015). Instead, the blurring between private and public forms of accountability could mean that local governance concerns are in danger of being side-lined by business rather than educational rationales. This could have implications for the legitimacy of MATs and the extent to which they can operate in the interests of themselves and their students, and also the contribution they can make to their local communities and society as a whole.

[2.3.4 Understanding what constitutes good governance](#)

In further studies of governance, usually at a national level, there is the theme of governance being a necessary condition to maintain order within society or an organisation, and to create a climate for productive working relationships within its members. Governance is seen to be concerned with 'creating the conditions for ordered rule and collective action', and for coping with 'external challenges' (Stoker, 1998:17); for 'preventing conflict amongst its members' (Rosenau, 1992:3); and with the recognition that the boundaries between the public and private sectors have become increasingly blurred (Gunter, 2011; Stoker, 1998; Walford, 2014a). In his examination of the key principles of governance, Stoker (1998) presents a set of 'propositions' to consider. Underpinning each of these is the recognition that governance concerns living with uncertainty, and necessitates the designing of institutions 'in a way that recognizes both the potential and the limitations of human knowledge and understanding' (Stoker 1998:24-26). For many MATs, and for those in this study in particular, they are at a position of great change in their organisation, either through expansion, or through being new to the MAT system, and with this, uncertainty will be a key feature. Uncertainty amongst both policy-makers and the public, over who holds responsibility is a feature of

the blurring of public and private institutions, and can sometimes lead to shifting in blame and scapegoating when things go wrong (Stoker, 1998). Successive UK governments have set up a neo-liberal system of education, where performativity and inspection are at the core. Under such a system, education has been regarded as a marketable commodity, using the values, language and systems of business (Apple, 2006). By passing responsibility on to MATs, governments have avoided accountability for the negative aspects of this system. For their part, MATs are likely to be extremely mindful of potential factors which could contribute to the failure of its organisation, and will seek to apply systems to mitigate against this. A number of factors could provide the seeds for governance failure: failures of leadership in its academies; differences over priorities, time scales and the visions among key partners; and the depth of any conflict amongst its wide range of stakeholders (e.g., Orr and Stoker, 1994; Stoker, 1998). Governing seen as an interactive process, with the MAT working with all its partners, is likely to be more successful. Stoker, drawing on Kooiman's (1993) work, acknowledged that 'no single actor, public or private, has the knowledge and resource capacity to tackle problems unilaterally' (Stoker, 1998:22). What many of these studies of governance have in common, is the recognition that, in order to be sustainable, an organisation needs to be capable of evolving, adapting to change, constantly learning, and being robust to endure public scrutiny and to be capable of defending itself (e.g., Goodin, 1996; Stoker; 1998).

Rose and Miller (2010) present a further opportunity to examine the new education governance system of MATs, using their analysis of power and the state, with a focus on inter-relations. They urge us to attend to how authorities in the past have asked themselves the following questions: what is our power; to what ends should it be exercised; what effects has it produced; how can we know what we need to know, and do what we need to do in order to govern?' (Rose and Miller, 2010:275). One could consider this in relation to how a MAT relates to the government structures above it, but also those below, i.e., its academies, for whom it is the seat and enactment of governance. The questions posed by Rose and Miller are questions which MAT trust boards could usefully ask themselves, in an honest self-interrogation of the substantial power they hold, and the responsibilities given to individuals and bodies within their MAT. Rose and Miller use the concept of 'action at a distance', borrowed from Bruno Callon and Michel

Latour (e.g., Callon 1986; Callon and Latour, 1981), to describe the modern approach to governing. Callon and Latour (1981), in turn, draw on the work of Thomas Hobbes, the 17th century philosopher, in their critical analysis of macro- and micro-actors within a population. If we take the macro-actors as being the MAT or an education network, and the micro-actors the individuals within or affected by the MAT, then Hobbes' statement that:

‘there is no difference between the actors which is inherent in their nature. All differences in level, size and scope are the result of a battle or a negotiation’
(Hobbes, in Callon and Latour, 1981:279),

prompts the questions a) how do micro-actors become in the position of macro-actors, and b) who sets the terms for the battle and negotiation? Critics of the Academies Programme, and specifically the MAT system, are concerned that this system of education encourages ‘governing and managing at a distance’ and is likely to create a system of ‘macro-actors’ and ‘micro-actors’, with potentially conflicting priorities. This could be more likely in larger MATs which cover a wide geographical spread, with trust board members not known to the individual academies, as is the case for at least one of the MATs in this study. In order to be successful, the forging of mutually trusting alliances is at the heart of ‘action at a distance’ (e.g., Rose and Miller, 2010), and is an element worthy of further examination within new and growing MATs.

2.4 Accountability and decision-making within the new education policy landscape

2.4.1 Opaque accountability structures: understanding the exercise of power

The questions Rose and Miller would wish authorities and ‘macro-actors’ to ask themselves, in relation to the power they hold, are likely to reflect the model of accountability and designation of responsibilities which a new or expanding MAT chooses to adopt. However, this process is by no means straightforward. The promotion of academies as the norm, could be seen as part of a much wider political agenda with its focus on less state (and government) responsibility, and an inclusion of various other individuals and organisations, bringing a less clear structure of accountability. Using Ball's (2011:146) critique, this move to academisation, with the concomitant MAT governance model, could be an ‘example and indicator’ of ‘general turbulence taking place in public

sector governance and regulatory structures'; and also, part of a generic global shift in public service policy discourse in language, ideas, organisation, technologies and practices (Ball, 2013). The welfare, health and prison services in the UK are all now subject to what Ball (2011:147) would call a 're-culturing and re-invention', where market values such as competition, choice and performance-related funding prevail. Rose and Miller (2010) warn that we may find contemporary forms of rule hard to understand, unless we examine how language affects 'systems of action', as well as 'systems of thought'. By doing this, they suggest we would be more able to understand the exercise of political power, and to have the capacity to make judgement of 'the alternatives on offer' (Rose and Miller, 2010:298-299). Gunter and McGinty (2014:311) argue that as phrases like "new freedoms" become frequently used, there is a tendency for this to be considered a reality, with little room for dissent, resulting in 'political debate [being] replaced by censure'.

As the main benefits claimed for the growing Academies Programme have been couched in terms of greater flexibility, freedom and decentralisation, any opposition to this was unlikely to be successful, since 'calls for inflexibility and centralization are, to say the least, not likely to be very galvanizing' (Fisher, 2009:28). With little credible opposition, therefore, schools have been encouraged or manoeuvred into forging new partnerships, which bring with this certain school-based accountability measures, identified as market, legal, hierarchical, contractual, network, participative and professional (West et al, 2011; Wilkins, 2012). Whilst it could be argued that academies have to comply with most, if not all, these measures, Wilkins (2012:22) implies that participative accountability (i.e., accountable to a range of stake-holders from pupils, parents, teacher, governors and community members) poses the greatest challenge for academies, as they are in the 'unique position' of being independent from the LA, but not from their sponsors. Wilkins calls for academies to have greater clarity with their local community, in terms of an understanding of participative accountability: 'who these accountability measures are aimed at and what kinds of assumptions they entail about those to be held accountable' (Wilkins, 2012:23). Indeed, the very foundations of accountability are said to be transparency and trustworthiness (Bovens, 2007), and this is especially pertinent, given the new (and often-reported opaque) relations between trust boards and members, local

governing bodies, staff, parents and community stakeholders (e.g., House of Commons, 2017; Tinker 2015).

2.4.2 Chosen accountability models: an indicator of how the MAT will relate to its academies and communities

Hooge et al (2012) present two typologies of school accountability: vertical and horizontal. '*Vertical accountability*' is a more traditional, centralised model, with top-down, hierarchy at its core. It is concerned with rule and regulation compliance and holds schools accountable to the quality of education they provide. At its heart is regulatory and school performance accountability. '*Horizontal accountability*' assumes non-hierarchical relationships, and has two elements. The first is concerned with teachers' professional responsibilities, which Hooge et al term '*professional accountability*', entailing working to credible, useful standards, and forming professional learning communities. The second element of the horizontal model of accountability, termed '*multiple school accountability*', is more akin to Wilkins' participative stakeholder model, and focuses on teachers' interactions with other stakeholders ('*multiple stakeholder accountability*'), involving students, parents, communities and other stakeholders in formulating strategies, decision-making, and evaluation (Hooge et al, 2012:9). Hooge et al acknowledge that for complex education systems with diversified structures and new stakeholders, which could be how MATs are positioned, having a mix of both vertical and horizontal systems may be beneficial.

Pierre and Peters (2005:5) define accountability as 'holding those actors delivering governance to the society to be accountable for their actions'. It is aimed at protecting against irresponsibility and provides a controlling mechanism which may raise quality of the procedures (Sztompka, 1999). Amongst both academics and politicians, there remain serious concerns over the systems of accountability, governance and transparency in the Academies Programme. Gunter (2011) points to a 'democratic deficit', where, because of their new governance system, academies and MATs are not subject to local elected representative scrutiny, with their 'thick understanding of democracy' (Apple et al, 2018:4-5), and which others warn could be signalling a 'depreciation and demise of participatory democracy' (Kulz, 2015). Gunter (2011:12) is also concerned over the lack of transparency in the 'discussions and deal-makings' which occur when a school is

considering converting to academy status and joining a MAT, or indeed when a MAT is debating taking on new schools. This lack of transparency and access to information for both schools and the general public on the processes involved in joining a MAT, are likely to make a highly complex situation unnecessarily confusing, if not stressful, 'making navigation in this market particularly problematic' (Salokangas and Chapman, 2014:383). A House of Commons Education Select Committee set up to look at the balance of decision-making at school and MAT level and the appropriateness of formal governance structures, expressed concern over lack of communication and understanding about the new decision-making powers MAT trust boards would have, and therefore, a subsequent downgrading of accountability on the part of local governing:

'While we welcome the Government's recent document which set out examples of best practice in governance, 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. The Department must improve and extend the advice and guidance they offer'.

House of Commons, 2017: para. 42.

The Committee was also concerned that MATs were 'not sufficiently accountable to their local community' (para. 46). Parents told the committee that they felt disconnected from decision making at trustee board level, causing the committee to state that 'there is too much emphasis on "upward" accountability and not enough on local engagement' (para. 46). With a decreasing number of locally-elected LA representatives, and diminished powers of local governing bodies, parents could feel that there is no mechanism to influence their child's school (Greany and Higham, 2018). This is certainly in contrast to the 2016 White Paper's enthusiasm for 'empowering' parents and the local community, and highlights a concern that the local voice has been side-lined, in favour of the little-known centralised MAT (Tinker, 2015). Questions need to be asked about whether members of the local community feel they have a say or any control in the workings of the MAT, given that it may be the case that to succeed, 'efforts to create an education marketplace must necessarily seek to remove control of schools from the communities they serve' (Molnar, 2006:635). It could be that these concerns by the House of Commons

Committee are an acknowledgement that local democracy has already been compromised: that ‘the privatisation of decision-making’ (Ball, 2005:215) has already been accepted by politicians and policy-makers. Wilkins (2012:25) stated that ensuring ‘accountability and fairness in education’ should be of prime importance, when academies are organising themselves to address locally-defined ‘encounters, engagements and contingences’. However, perspectives on ‘accountability and fairness’ are likely to differ amongst various stakeholders, and are subject to circumstances, including the interests of the MAT sponsors.

2.4.3 Private sector involvement: a signal of weakening democratic accountability, or a welcome change?

Skelcher (1998: 181) warned of a democratic deficit that results from the increasing participation of executive agencies, businesses and voluntary organisations in the governance of public institutions, identifying their ‘weaker accountability, audit and governance standards’ – a precursor to what Ball (2013:226) describes as a ‘new modality of state power, agency and social action’. Around the same time as Skelcher’s work, Miller and Dickson (1996) conducted research on attitudes towards local governance, with Stoker concluding from this research that:

‘The public demonstrated a strong preference for organisation and control of local services to be in the hands of an elected council as against appointed bodies or private sector providers’ (Stoker, 1998:19).

Interestingly, Miller and Dickson found that LA models of provision run by private-sector providers, appointed bodies and sometimes even provision directly run by service users were not seen as legitimate. This thesis, conducted over 20 years later, explores whether or not appointed trust boards are seen as legitimate bodies in the running of local education provision. Related to this, the next section examines the literature on the implications of the choice of accountability structures on the autonomy and agency of school leaders.

2.5 The implications for leader autonomy and agency, in a system promising 'new freedoms'

2.5.1 Who benefits in a system freed from 'the shackles of bureaucracy'?

The Academies Programme would seem to be located across what Ball (2013) describes as two kinds of freedom. There is the libertarian view of freedom (the demand side), typified in the Academies Programme as the freedom to be able to set up your own school or have a wider choice between schools of different types, run by different providers; and a market freedom (supply side), opening up public services to non-state providers. Ball (2013:212) equates the former with the 'Big Society', with its interests in localism and mutualism, and the latter with 'Big Capital', representing the interests of business, large chains, both national and multi-national. When the first City academies were developed in the 2000s, they tended to operate as single entities, and it is possible that they did enjoy more autonomy, compared to being a maintained school, for example with the headteacher and governors developing their own curriculum according to the needs of their school population. In language typifying the prevailing libertarian ideology, the Conservative Government declared that academies would 'set schools free from the shackles of local bureaucracy' (Osborne, 2016:n.p.). This rhetoric could be seen as part of the 'rampant doxa of neoliberalism' where the statement is 'so far beyond question that the fact of questioning [it] itself seems questionable' (Bourdieu 2003:79), and thus, as Gunter and McGinty (2014) have suggested, the sentiment becomes commonplace, being subsumed into the national discourse of state/private governance. This rhetoric is also situated in the claims that the school is a business organisation, and will have values and systems just like any other business, including roles of 'Director' and 'Chief Executive Officer'. Bourdieu (2003:36) urges researchers to 'fire back' to demolish and undermine such 'dominant beliefs', by 'putting research findings into an accessible form'. Gunter advocates a 'counter-doxa' based on critical science which sees educational sites as fundamentally different from business enterprises (Gunter, 2016:187). Paradoxically, the growth of MATs, with their central management and governance, and uniform approach to policy across their schools could be operating in way very similar to LAs, which have been the target of so much criticism (Ball, 2013; Gunter, 2011). There are concerns that new MATs, especially large ones, are adopting the practices seen in large businesses or government departments, with their tendency to standardise ethos, policies and the

curriculum across all schools within the MAT (e.g., Ball 2013; Gunter 2011). The term 'sponsor-approved networks' may also sound alarm-bells for advocates of freedom and autonomy. Indeed, in their research on governance in two MATs, Salokangas and Chapman (2014) suggest that the focus of autonomy is misdirected and disingenuous:

'Rather than referring to academies as autonomous schools, the policy discourse should highlight the autonomous nature of sponsors and their decision-making competence over the academies they run' (Salokangas and Chapman, 2014:383).

In 2016, the National Schools Commissioner conceded that membership of a MAT 'probably does' reduce autonomy, in areas such as systems and operating procedures, data collection, assessment and reporting, HR practice, and most tellingly, key educational policies (Carter, 2016:12). These responsibilities are now at the trust board level, which comprise a relatively small group of people, compared to the larger LGBs. For this reason, Higham (2014) and Mansell (2016) call for maximum transparency at all levels of decision making about the future of schools and a robust scrutiny of who owns our schools. Carter reassured his audience of ASCL (Association of School and College Lecturers) members that autonomy (for individual schools and local governing bodies) would be retained in areas such as the culture of the school, relationships with the local community and education networks unique to the school. For schools going into a new relationship with a MAT, it is pertinent to explore the notion of autonomy – what it means to individuals and groups in different roles, how any changes in autonomy affect their sense of agency, and to what extent any autonomy or powers are negotiated, and on what terms.

2.5.2 School leaders joining a MAT: a reduction in agency, or an opportunity to negotiate a new professional identity?

Coldron et al's (2015:682) research on the positioning of headteachers in primary and secondary schools in England identified factors relating to prestige, and in their interviews noted the 'effects of habitus and symbolic and material positioning', and 'an awareness of the complex legacy of meaning, identities, practices and dispositions' with the primary/secondary distinction. Such material and symbolic differences in capital, position and power within MATs are likely to be important factors in how negotiations between trusts and their schools play out, both at the point of discussion on a new sponsorship

arrangement or re-brokering, and once a new school has joined the MAT. This could have implications for headteachers' and others school leaders' sense of personal agency. The literature suggests there may be a danger of a 'patterned sense of superiority and subordination' (Coldron et al, 2015:681) emerging between CEOs of MATs and headteachers, and also amongst headteachers *within* a MAT. There is evidence to suggest that higher-performing schools have a greater degree of power and agency to determine their own futures, but also that lesser-performing schools are concerned about 'future-proofing' from 'later imposition of outcomes over which they might have no control' once they join a MAT (Simkins et al, 2015:11). Until recently, such schools would have sought support from their LA, but with the LA's diminished role, that can no longer be guaranteed. Hill (2018) suggests that MATs need to be clear about their non-negotiables, whilst at the same time, aiming for a co-construction of agreement with their schools. Such a co-construction will be open to interpretation, as will the definition of 'non-negotiables'; where the final decision rests in points of disagreement will provide insight into the power relations and values at play.

Becoming an academy and joining a MAT has implications for the school leaders' roles and professional identity. A sense of sadness and conflicting feelings was expressed by primary heads in Coldron et al's (2015) research, as they moved into an executive head role with responsibility and accountability over several schools, due to their high performance in their own school. With this change, heads could be seen to be moving into the role of 'leader-as-hero' (e.g., Bush, 2020a; Cohen, 2010; Collinson et al, 2018; Kulz, 2015), with the danger of lack of external critique this has been noted to bring (Collinson et al, 2018), and the necessary distancing from their original school. Joining a MAT also has implications for previously autonomous headteachers who may now find themselves 'head-of-school', with an executive head above them. Traditionally, achieving headteacher status was the pinnacle of a teacher's career, and was the culmination of many years professional practice, typically accompanied by high regard by both the teaching profession and the administrative hierarchy (e.g., Bush, 2020b). These are individuals whose professional knowledge and skills act as 'emblems of personal achievement' (Fairclough, 2015:90), and some will have had these achievements recognised and rewarded by central government (e.g., Cousin, 2019). Shifting role from

autonomous headteacher of a single school to 'head of school' where an executive head or principal holds overall control, power and accountability, can be seen as an effective demotion, and is likely to be accompanied by an examination of one's sense of agency and professional identity. In research on school principals' identities, Crow et al (2017:269) note that principals 'can experience vulnerabilities when control of long-held principles and practices is challenged by policy changes or new expectations for standards, when their moral integrity is questioned', and that existing identities may become 'a continuing site of struggle' (MacLure, 1993:312).

There are added vulnerabilities to the sense of agency and identity, in the way that school heads or principals cannot take their authority within the school (or a MAT) for granted, so that 'their legitimacy with various stakeholders must continually be negotiated and renegotiated' (Helstad and Møller, 2013:250). Ringen (2013:51) noted that leaders who display 'strong and stable' authority are more likely to be regarded as legitimate leaders, as are those deemed to have 'legitimate knowledge' of the field (Riddle and Apple, 2019:3). There is also the possibility that for some school leaders who had previously been working in a difficult school situation, the new MAT system, with its potential to focus on managerialism, has helped to establish a new professional identity, that 'give[s] new meaning to their lives and enable[s] them to recapture their feelings of worthiness and efficacy' (Apple, 2006:228).

2.5.3 A lateral model of leadership to include more voices and values

Given the Government's claim of aiming for empowerment beyond in-school stakeholders, Gunter's examination of school leadership is relevant. She suggests that the 'transformative leadership' model is one which is 'socially critical' and is based on the premise that leadership exists between individuals, rather than within one person, and the concern is oriented towards 'social vision and change', not simply organisation goals (Gunter, 2016:167). Within this model, there is an implicit recognition that all stakeholders, including staff, parents, children and governors, have agency that can be used to 'illuminate a situation, contribute to a discussion, take on tasks and functionally sort something out' (Gunter, 2016:167), due to a blurring of boundaries in traditional leadership. It is useful to explore whether some MATs may be operating within this framework of leadership, and if in fact different stakeholders feel a new sense of agency,

which they perhaps did not have previously, in contrast to the scenario presented earlier, of a loss of agency when joining a MAT. Gunter (2016) looks to critical science to urge researchers to examine not only which values are important, but whose values seem to matter most, and why. This study, by listening to the voices of different stakeholders, shining a light on their experiences of agency and involvement, as well as hearing how school leaders view their contribution and changed status, aims to explore such questions. The next section will look at the importance of trust and building relationships within the context of new accountability regimes and changed status.

2.6 'The glue that fills the gaps': collaboration and trusting relationships

2.6.1 Trust based on accountability signalling organisational expectations

In his examination of the role of trust in learning-oriented assessment practices, Carless (2009) suggests that accountability has the potential for contributing to organisational trust. Whilst acknowledging that accountability can often sow mistrust and be associated with arbitrary decision-making, Carless asserts that accountability can also be seen to guard against irresponsibility and provide assurance to the members of its organisation that valid checks or controls are in place, to ensure the quality of procedures and decisions (Carless, 2009; Sztompka, 1999). Carless (2009:79) defines organisational trust as positive expectations individuals have about the 'intents and behaviours of organisational members based on roles, relationships and interdependencies'. It is also seen as the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and co-operative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms (Fukuyama, 1996). A culture of collaboration with its reciprocal nature of working, is seen as key to the growth of trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2001), as is frequent and accurate communication between all players (Gimbel, 2003). Whilst frequent change within an organisation can undermine trust, and make for a disgruntled workforce, especially if this involves job instability (e.g., Sztompka 1999), reforms are seen to be easier to achieve in high-trust collaborative institutions (Louis 2007).

2.6.2 Collaboration and respect for a range of views: trusting leaders and senior staff with autonomy

Popp et al (2015) have recognised that within networks, higher levels of trust tend to lead to greater effectiveness. Greany and Higham (2018:101), in their examination of the 'self-improving school-led system', question how this system can secure trust amongst teaching professionals, parents and pupils, and what might be required to 'create meaningful engagement for these core stakeholders'. Creating trust and empowering individuals within the school workforce is seen as a necessary condition for higher performance (Hargreaves, 2007; Tinker, 2015). Trust and empowerment, along with collaboration, necessitate a form of leadership which recognises participation as key, and one which 'engages with all the communities schools touch' (Tinker, 2015:14). This form of leadership from a MAT would involve the centralised management and governance regime engaging with players from all levels across the trust, giving autonomy to individual heads and governing bodies. It would also be more likely to promote mutual trust amongst leaders and MAT managers, with the consequence of greater cooperation and fewer conflicts of views (Cerna, 2014). Wilkins and Olmedo (2019) contest this preference for consensus on governing boards, believing that having a diverse range of views would prompt and welcome challenge and debate, thus making any seat of governance more comfortable with the concept of 'dissensus', which better reflects the participative model of governance favoured by Wilkins (2019).

Sydow (2004) recognises the importance for new networks to develop high-trust relationships and warns against formalized evaluation at the early stage. Indeed, a focus on high degrees of formalisation and centralisation are often accompanied by rigid rules, which can hinder the emergence of trustworthy behaviours, such as delegation and open communication (Creed and Miles, 1996). In the new MAT landscape, where school leaders are often required to relinquish areas of previously-held control, Greany and Ehren (2016:n.p.) identified the cultural challenges faced by school leaders 'used to running their own ship', having to adhere and work within the framework set by the central MAT. They noted that tensions arising needed to be resolved for the partnership to be effective. In addition to the MAT/school-leader axis of trust, school leaders also need to earn the trust of their own staff and the school community. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015), in their research on high-trust and low-trust schools, found that

competence was the most often-mentioned element contributing to the trust or distrust of the school leader. Skills related to competence included setting both an example and high standards, solving problems, working hard and resolving conflicts. Bryk and Schneider (2002), in their conceptualisation of trust, propose the notion of relational trust, based in the social exchanges attached to key role relationships found in schools (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Cranston, 2011). Relational trust concerns the extent to which there is consonance with respect to each individual's or group's understanding of each other's expectations and obligations. It also goes beyond role expectations and is tied to personal identity (Speligman, 2001). For the head of a MAT, decisions will need to be made about the degree of autonomy given to each head of its academies, which is likely to have an impact on academy leaders' sense of personal identity, and this will involve relational trust. However, bestowing autonomy to an academy leader, is not without risk. This 'risk-taking act' (e.g., Bottery, 2004; Cerna, 2014; Mayer et al, 1995; Rousseau et al, 1998) can place the bestower, in this case the MAT CEO, in a vulnerable position, and a calculation of the implications of trusting an academy leader will need to be made (e.g., Bottery, 2003; 2004).

2.6.3 Recognising the 'collective wisdom' of all stakeholders

Whilst it has been argued that formal control and monitoring increases the likelihood of trust (e.g., Sitkin, 1995), others signal the importance of allowing sufficient time for trust and 'genuine commitment' to be built within a networked organisation (e.g., Popp et al, 2015). Somewhat controversially, Fullan (2011:16) suggests that one should 'respect others before they have earned the right to be respected' rather than a manager feeling the need to be constantly monitoring their staff (e.g., Powell, 1996), or within a regime which calls for 'sustained contact, regular dialogue, and constant monitoring' (Sabel, 1993:65). For schools joining a MAT, particularly if it has been an imposed move, the benefits of collaboration may not be obvious (Ehren and Perryman, 2018), and it is likely that there will be some reluctance on the part of academy leaders and local governors, to lose some control (Simkins et al, 2015). This could be exacerbated where academy-leaders felt there was a hierarchy of academies operating within the MAT, with lower-performers at the bottom, excluded from meaningful decision-making, and resulting in the pattern of superiority and subordination mentioned earlier (Coldron et al, 2015). The

building of trust between the MAT and its joining schools, and across academies within the organisation could be expected to alleviate concerns and provide a more collaborative working relationship: it is the 'glue that fills the gaps' (Puranam and Vanneste, 2009:24). Similarly, including staff and governors from a joining school in both academy-based and MAT-wide decision making could be a sign of a willingness to involve a plurality of voices, one of the features of agonistic democracy, discussed by Hammersley-Fletcher et al (2018), and would be expected to engender a sense of control, through the 'power of participation' (Hammersley-Fletcher et al, 2018:603), and signifying mutual trust, where the 'professional knowledge' and 'collective wisdom' of all the stakeholders is recognised and valued (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015:271). In their review of the literature on trust and governance, Klijn et al (2010) posit that trust stimulates learning and the exchange of information and knowledge, and can only really be achieved through intensive cooperation, with reliability being a further crucial ingredient (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015). Hargreaves (2012) has argued that joint practice development amongst teachers across schools is a model for professional learning and is a mechanism for building shared cultures and commitment to the success of the organisation. In essence, this is what the Academies Programme hoped to achieve, with in-built, tailor-made school-to-school support. This study explores how this might be playing out, in relation to the issues around academy-leader autonomy and the scope for negotiation and meaningful participation amongst the MAT's stakeholders.

2.7 Summary of Chapter 2

This chapter has outlined literature relevant to the key themes of this study: governance, accountability, autonomy and agency, legitimacy and trust. The study uses this body of academic work to support and interrogate the data collected, and through analysis and discussion, shows how the study has made a contribution to the current corpus of work. The next chapter will present the methodology of the study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will explain the methodological approach taken in this study, to address its aims and key questions. Section 3.2 states these aims, followed by a reiteration of the three key research questions in Section 3.3. Section 3.4 presents the theoretical influences on the current study, explaining why a combination of a constructivist phenomenological interpretivist approach with policy enactment theory was taken. In Section 3.5, I show how the application of the theoretical framework is appropriate for this study, and the value of its contribution. Section 3.6 details how the research was conducted, including the research sites, participants, and data collection methods. Section 3.7 gives the rationale for applying a thematic analytical framework to the data and explains the method of analysis. In Section 3.8, I reflect on the consideration of research integrity and ethics within the study, including researcher positioning and trust, and validity, trustworthiness and credibility. An evaluation of the methodology adopted is discussed in section 3.9, where limitations and alternative approaches are considered.

3.2 Aims of the research

With the shift in governance from democratically elected bodies of single schools, to appointed trust boards accountable for an expanding number of schools within their MAT, this research aimed to explore what governance and accountability meant to a range of stakeholders in MATs, from CEOs to parents, and what were the practical implications for these individuals. Linked to this, was the impact that the chosen governance and accountability structures had had on the sense of autonomy and agency on academy leaders, local governors and parents. Both of these issues lead to the third aim of the research, which was to examine what legitimacy of the MATs looked like for the various stakeholders.

3.3 Research Questions

After an initial reading of the literature, detailed in Chapter 2, I mapped out areas of interest, with a focus on what the impact of being part of a MAT had on those involved, especially those who were new to the system, compared to being part of the state-run LA system. These areas included: accountability and openness; governance (including

parents, and a new role for the LA); the reality of empowerment; position and attitude of school leadership and staff; whether there was autonomy for schools, or just a new form of standardisation and bureaucracy; and localism/community. Appendix 1 shows an example of this formative mapping process.

From this, in 2016, I formed my initial research questions:

1. What does accountability mean to those involved in the new Academies Programme, and how is it realised?
2. What might be the implications of the changes in formal governance structures to those involved in a sponsored academy?
3. How is transparency understood and experienced within the Academies Programme structure?

Subsequently, through further discussions with my supervisory team, and colleagues both within and outside my organisation, attending seminars, meetings and conferences given by researchers in the field, and presenting my initial findings at these events, I reviewed the research questions. Such reflection also prompted me to re-examine the data I was starting to collect, and my interpretations of participants' experiences, and to listen more attentively to the accounts they were giving. As an iterative process, this also provoked me to review some of the questions I was putting to my participants, with data from earlier interviews informing how I approached subsequent interviews. This confirmed my initial decision to use thematic analysis on my data, with new themes being identified, which then fed into any further interviews and analysis. As a result of this continually reflective and reflexive process, I modified my research questions into a form which I believed would enable me to explore the essence of what the newly adopted governance and accountability structures meant to the everyday experiences of those involved in the MATs, in terms of active involvement, agency and legitimacy. The research questions would offer the opportunity to 'illuminate individual voices' (Gunter, 2016:167), as well as providing substance for further debate on the research implications on policy and practice within MATs in the areas of governance, accountability, legitimacy, autonomy and agency.

The reformed and final research questions are as follows:

Research Question One (RQ1): What does governance and accountability mean to those involved in MATs, and what are the practical implications for individuals?

Research Question Two (RQ2): What are the implications for those in positions of local leadership and local governance, in terms of autonomy and agency?

Research Question Three (RQ3): What does legitimacy look like for MATs?

I now go on to consider the methodological underpinnings that would assist me in addressing these questions, starting with the theoretical framework adopted.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

3.4.1 Theoretical influences

With the purpose of gaining a deep understanding of individuals' experiences, the study was framed within a constructivist-interpretivist approach. Constructivism and interpretivism share an intellectual heritage, and have a relativist ontological position, which assumes multiple, and sometimes conflicting social realities, being constructed through the meanings and understandings which people develop socially and experientially (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). To approach inquiry from an interpretivist or constructivist stance, is to acknowledge multiple perspectives within the same data (Lincoln et al, 2011). From this position, it is acknowledged that these constructed realities may change, as the 'constructors' become more informed and sophisticated (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), and adapt to new perspectives. The epistemological position of constructivists and interpretivists is transactional and subjectivist, in that it assumes knowledge as being co-created in interaction between the investigator and respondent(s) (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Thus, the constructivist and interpretivist approaches share the goal of understanding the 'complex world of lived experience from the viewpoint of those who live it' (Schwandt, 1994:118), for concern of engaging with the insider point of view. Further, the inquirer in a study set within these paradigms offers their own construction of the constructions of the actors: the researcher is cast as both participant and facilitator in the inquiry process. This adds a layer of complication in the interpretation of experiences: in this study, as researcher, I needed to be aware of the impact that my own assumptions and

preconceptions may have had on my interpretations and analysis of the data, and this is examined in section 3.9.

3.4.2 Constructivism

Constructivism within the social sciences, whilst emanating from very early philosophical arguments, is generally acknowledged to have been founded as a theory of reality and cognition (Schwandt, 1994) by Nelson Goodman (1984), and is based on many of the same principals as interpretivism (Section 3.4.3). Constructivist arguments state that what we believe to be objective truth and knowledge is, in reality, partial and subject to the result of our own perspective as an individual. Constructivists object to the notions of empirical realism, arguing that knowledge is not 'out there' to be found or discovered, but that humans construct it, in an attempt to make sense of their experiences (e.g., Bruner, 1986; Fuss, 1989). To make sense of experience, we are thus in a cycle of inventing concepts, schemes and models, which we then test out and subsequently modify (Schwandt, 1994). Goodman (1978:163) urged us to reflect on the systems we use in our efforts to make interpretations of experiences, and this he termed as 'ways of worldmaking'. Rather than seek to 'arrive at an accurate and comprehensive description of the real, readymade world', he urges us to aim:

'To construct something that works cognitively, that fits together and handles new cases, that may implement further inquiry and invention' (Goodman, 1978:163).

Within the constructivist paradigm, there are several different persuasions which are relevant to this study. For example, social constructivism (e.g., Gergen, 1985; Gergen and Gergen, 1991) focuses on the collective generation of meaning amongst participants, as shaped by language and other para-linguistic and social processes. The ontological belief within social constructivism is that multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and through our interactions with others (Creswell and Poth, 2018), and that the world and reality are interpreted by people in the context of historical and social practices (Higgs, 2001). In their discourse analysis study of sadism and masochism, Taylor and Ussher (2001:293) rejected the notion that complex phenomena could be explained by referring to 'some supposed inner truth or essence'. Instead, they proposed that there is a multiplicity of interrelated, subjective and often oppositional understandings, each with their own inherent validity. They were thus arguing that the world is complex, it is

only partially understood and that these understandings vary between individuals, time periods and cultural and geographic locations. Social constructivists contend that the researcher or observer should not be 'disentangled' from the observed in the research process, and that the findings or outcomes of an inquiry are a creation or construction of the inquiry process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1994). In a further constructivist persuasion, 'Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism', Eisner (1991:86), drawing on Suzanne Langer, Michael Polanyi and John Dewey, frames the inquirer as 'connoisseur-turned-critic', where he or she presents not a 'mirror of reality', but a reconstitution of the original experience (Schwandt, 1994:129). In this interpretation of inquirer, my role as researcher in this study would be to present and discuss with the participants during the interview process, my interpretation of their recounts, for further consideration, confirmation and challenge, which in turn, would prompt further discussion.

The next section examines the tradition of interpretivism, identifying some of the factors which distinguish it from constructivism.

3.4.3 Interpretivism

Interpretivism emerged as a critique to positivism and scientism, based on the understanding of the meaning of social phenomena, and draws on the German intellectual tradition of hermeneutics and the 'Verstehen' (understanding) tradition in sociology (largely credited to Max Weber) and the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (1967a; 1967b), Aaron Cicourel (1964), and Harold Garfinkel (1967). With a focus on everyday, subjective meaning and experience, and not being afraid to recognise the inherent bias of qualitative interpretation, a study within the interpretivist tradition aims to 'treat subjectivity as a topic for investigation in its own right, rather than be seen as a methodological taboo' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994:264). Researchers in the interpretivist tradition, assume that reality is construed 'intra-subjectively and intersubjectively through the meanings and understandings garnered from our social world' (Angen, 2000:385), drawing on our personal histories, experiences, expectations and knowledge of others. In its prioritising of 'the real-world of first-person, subjective experience' (Schwandt, 1994:119), interpretivism has been criticised for its lack of scientific objectivity. In its defence, Hammersley (1992:135), has argued 'that interpretivists investigate independent, knowable, actor-constructed phenomena', whilst

acknowledging the agentic role of the investigator. Indeed, the interpretivist's approach to research practice becomes the act of 'actively debating and exchanging points of view with our informants' (Jackson, 1989:14). Jackson contended that this involves the researcher placing their ideas on a par with those of their participants, avoiding using pre-determined standards or rationality to give meaning to their experiences, but rather placing these within the context of the demands and constraints of their lives. Thus, for this study, this would mean showing the participants that I understood their experiences were being framed within the context of their own particular circumstances, perspective, setting and role, and there was not a pre-set agenda of expected responses.

The next section considers how the study's use of a phenomenological interpretive approach contributes to a deeper understanding of the research questions.

3.4.4 Phenomenology

Interpretivism draws on and encompasses various research philosophies, such as phenomenology and hermeneutics. Phenomenological approaches seek to 'explore, describe and analyse the meaning of individual lived experience' (Marshall and Rossman, 2011:19), with a deep interest in how people perceive, describe, feel and judge their experience(s) (Patton, 2002). Husserl (1970), who is regarded as being the founder of the phenomenological approach to research, saw it as an attempt to unfold the meaning of experience in everyday life. Heidegger (in Schwandt, 1994), conceived hermeneutic phenomenology, which stresses that every event or encounter involves some type of interpretation from an individual's background, and so acknowledging that context is key for understanding. Heidegger's 'hermeneutic circle' went further, with his claim that one's understanding of the whole is also dependent on the understanding of the individual parts or experiences of the constructs under study. Schutz's (1967a) conception of interpretation, built on Husserl's 'horizontal structure of experience', proposed that every object or experience appears 'under the horizon' of a 'previous familiarity or pre-acquaintanceship' (Gurwitsch, 1962:53), and forms the basis of what Schutz termed our 'stock of knowledge at hand', as the reference point for interpretation and orientation of daily experiences. Generally unquestioned, elements of this stock of knowledge may be confronted when in a situation where the accepted rules cannot be easily assimilated, if, for example, they fail us in our pursuit of our practical interests and goals (Gurwitsch,

1962). Within this analysis, Gurwitsch discusses Schutz's notion of 'typification'.

'Typification' is the conception that our social interactions are based on the assumptions that people will act in accordance with the role (social, professional, personal) assigned to them: we 'typify' their personality and have expectations of how they will act within their role. Any rupture to this typification, is likely to cause some upheaval within the social interaction. This is important within the context of newly-formed, or rapidly-expanding MATs, as duties and expectations within roles are likely to have been changed, and possibly without the awareness of all those affected by such changes. In a context where people rely on each other to behave as expected, any disruption to this could have implications for levels of trust.

Recent ideations of phenomenology include Moustakas' (1994:175) transcendental phenomenology model, which offers 'a way of utilizing description, reflection, and imagination in arriving at an understanding of what is', and 'opens possibilities for awareness, knowledge, and action'. Moustakas, drawing on Husserl's concept of 'horizontal structure of experience', interprets this to mean that every perception counts:

'Every perception adds something important to the experience [...] new perceptions always hold the possibility of contributing knowledge regarding any object' (Moustakas, 1994:335).

Moustakas stresses the importance of the phenomenological researcher being passionate about his/her study, having a personal interest in the focus of the inquirer, and sharing this interest with the 'researched'. Van Manen's (1990; 2014) hermeneutic phenomenology is in the Heidegger tradition, with the focus on the interpretation of lived experiences, and the 'texts of life'. He raises the concept of 'bracketing out' or 'epoche' of the researcher, in order to exclude his/her own experiences and thoughts, as he acknowledged the difficulty of dismissing previously held assumptions that the researcher brings to the inquiry (van Manen, 1990:47). Apple (2013) suggests that the model of researcher as 'unattached intelligentsia' (Mannheim, 1936) is out of date, pointing to the importance of the researcher being one that does not 'stand aside, neutral and indifferent' (Bourdieu, 2003:11) from the concerns of individuals, and the struggles of education: but rather, one who is a critical secretary who 'comes down from the balcony' (Rowley, 2014:52), to engage with such struggles and concerns. Creswell and Poth (2018),

look to LeVasseur (2003) when they suggest we may need a new definition of van Manen's 'epoche', such as 'suspending our understandings in a reflective move that cultivates curiosity' (Creswell and Poth, 2018:81).

The objectivity/subjectivity or 'epoche' dilemma is acknowledged and in fact encouraged in Smith's, 'Interpretive Phenomenology' (Smith, 2019; Smith et al, 2009). This approach, regarded as a 'double hermeneutic', (Smith, 2017; 2019) resonates with Heidegger's 'hermeneutic circle', in that it integrates both the participants' sense of their lived experience and the researcher, and is succinctly expressed thus:

'The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world' (Smith, 2019:171).

The interpretive phenomenology of Smith et al (2009), shares Schutz's social phenomenological approach in the notion that the intention and methods within a study should aim at the 'interpretation and explanation of human action and thought' (Schutz and Luckmann, 1974:3). What is produced in a phenomenological approach, are multiple, descriptive and explanatory claims about any phenomenon, each of which has value: some will be non-contradictory, and others will appear to be at odds with each other. This study presents a series of individual, and sometimes collective, interpretations of the experience of being within the MAT system, in relation to governance, accountability, legitimacy, agency and autonomy. Whether or not individuals are connected to the same organisation (academy or overarching MAT), or hold the same role, there will be similarities and differences in their experiences: the examination of both the contradictions and non-contradictions, and possible reasons for these, presents a valuable contribution to the rich data and in the understanding or 'Verstehen' of the issues under investigation.

After having argued the relevance of a constructivist phenomenological interpretivist framework for this study, the following section explains how it was necessary to look beyond this, to contextualise the multiple accounts and descriptions, within a social policy and policy enactment framework.

3.4.5 Critical Social Policy Theory and Policy Enactment Theory

Whilst this study is framed within phenomenological interpretivism, a further theoretical framing was needed to take note of policy impact, and effect of institutional authority on the participants involved in the study. Indeed, Heidegger, as noted earlier, saw context as key to understanding individual experiences. Lincoln et al (2011) stress that researchers must understand the culture and social context in which the data is generated to be able to accurately reflect what such data means to the study. Colebatch (2014) calls on researchers to be aware of factors that unsettle or stabilise interpretations, and notes that interpretation itself is shaped by institutional forces; indeed, he regards an interpretivist approach to be an essential element in any policy analysis:

‘Giving attention to interpretation is not an option, either for practitioners or observers, but an essential element of a good understanding of governing’
(Colebatch, 2014:349).

Conversely, understanding how policy is enacted in the complex environments in which a research study is situated is equally vital. The study has therefore drawn on theories of critical policy analysis and policy enactment theory to help contextualise the lived experiences, and to consider the nuances of local context. The work of Ball and colleagues over the past few decades (e.g., Ball, 1993; Ball et al, 2011; Braun et al, 2011; Maguire et al, 2011; Maguire et al, 2015), Gunter and colleagues (e.g., Gunter 2011; Gunter 2016; Gunter et al 2014), and of Colebatch (2006a; 2006b; 2014) are particularly relevant. With critical social theory as an ontological perspective, there is a focus on the understanding that people are socially located and therefore knowledge is always influenced by social interest (e.g., Habermas, 1972). Gunter (Gunter et al, 2014:6) has called for researchers in critical education and social policy to ‘critically begin research with the realities of people and their lives, and to commit to working for a socially just public education system’, in order to ‘make the ordinary visible’. As a researcher in critical education policy, I see this study contributing to making the ‘ordinary voices’ visible, and thus building on previous work which aims for a more equitable education system. Maguire et al (2015) and Colebatch (2006a) are equally clear in their appeal for researchers to take note of policy context, whilst falling short of calling for active intervention in shaping the policy situation. Colebatch (2002) noted that policy activity within educational settings typically

involved negotiations and coalition-building between various policy actors and implementors, but that this work was below the surface, and risked going unrecognised in policy analysis. This lack of attention to the socially and emotionally constructed process of policy enactment, has led Maguire et al (2015) and Colebatch (2006a) to call on policy researchers to be cognizant of the 'multi-layered and messy' processes involved in the steps from policy-making to policy-practice in schools (Maguire et al, 2015:486).

The national policies embedded within the government's academisation programme are likely to have been interpreted and represented within each MAT in ways specific to their particular context, and probably a reflection of the interest, priorities and values of the individuals leading the organisation. As such, in the policy process, there are 'interpretations of interpretations' (Rizvi and Kemmis, 1987:37), and this will reflect the 'rich underlife' and micropolitics (Braun et al, 2011:586) both within the overarching MAT, and in its individual academies. In their study of policy enactment in secondary schools and the localised nature of policy actions, Braun et al (2011) offered four contextual dimensions to examine policy enactment: *situated*, *professional*, *material* and *external*. This model acknowledges the active and dynamic force of policy context, rather than it being regarded as a 'backdrop'. The *situated context* considers a school's history, location, intake and demographics, and is often instrumental in the reputation the school earns. The *professional context* examines the values and commitments of staff beyond the headteacher, and their experiences of being actively involved in policy management and enactment: Braun et al (2011) point out the potential for dissonance between embedded institutional values and new national policy trends. The *material context* refers to the quality and layout of school buildings, and, of particular relevance to the MAT context, they note that schools operating across more than one site may see policy enacted in different ways in the various sites. The final aspect, *external contexts*, allows for the relationship a school has with the local authority and the DfE, its test results and position in league tables, all of which are likely to come under scrutiny when a potential CEO is making his or her case for creating or expanding a MAT.

In a study involving the examination of the short-comings of research on policy work in schools, Ball et al (2011) alleged that researchers needed to be more aware of how different actors in schools were positioned in relation to policy interpretation and

translation, and the agentic roles assigned to various individuals – whether they were ‘policy actors’ or ‘policy subjects’. In a newly-formed MAT, or one that is evolving and growing, individuals who were previously ‘policy actors’ may find themselves the subject of policy enactment, with little role in policy decision-making. Equally, prior to the MAT formation, individuals who had typically been less agentic in policy work, may be assigned to the role of policy instigator. This is where we could see instances of the rupture of Schutz’s notion of ‘typification’ where expectations of how individuals in certain roles were at odds with the reality. Ball et al (2011:619) identified individuals whose role was to ‘sell policy to staff’, leaving little room for alternative interpretations of policy, resulting in a consensual culture, and relying almost exclusively on compliance. In this context, there is an absence of a forum for critical discourse, where different views are valued and seen as valid. One of the concerns with this approach, is that local idiosyncrasies, priorities and interests are overridden by policies which are seen to come from outside (Buckles, 2010:7) in the form of central or local government, or indeed a trust board.

Viewed through the Foucauldian lens, policy making is about positioning and power (e.g., Foucault, 1986), or ‘representations of knowledge and power’ (Maguire et al, 2011). Drawing on Foucault’s examination of power and policies, Ball (1993) observed that (new) policies typically involved a redistribution and disruption of power relations, resulting in a change of activity within a role, often leading to changes in agency and constraint. Understanding this changing relationship between constraint and agency is a key factor in exploring the impact of policy change on individuals (e.g., Ball, 1993). Ball believes that for those who found themselves the beneficiaries of new power relations, it can change, and in some cases decrease the possibilities for ‘thinking otherwise’ thus limiting response to change. In the framing of ‘policy as discourse’, it is about not just what can be said and thought, but ‘who can speak, when, where and with what authority’ (Ball, 1993:14). Thus, policy has the potential effect of redistributing ‘voice’, with only certain voices being regarded as meaningful or authoritative. This is an interesting point for this study on two levels and has implications for how I interpreted people’s experiences. First, it means that I needed to be aware of the process of access to participants, whether or not they were chosen by the CEO or similar senior figure, and why; or if it was personal choice to be involved. Second, during interviews, a participant may have been aware of

the degree of authority assigned to their voice, which could result in them presenting their experiences in a particular way.

In their critical exploration of the enactment of policy in similar school environments, Maguire et al (2015), drawing on Spillane's (2004:181) conception of policy making as 'sense-making', note the importance of future researchers exploring how experience, positionality, allegiances, antagonisms, loyalties, and in-school relations play out in the interpretation and enactment of policies. Colebatch (2006b:10) used the phrase 'where you stand depends on where you sit', to conceptualise this important but precarious mix of perspectives, values and positions of different types of policies and policy actors, grounded in other contextual factors highlighted by Braun et al (2011), above. In his later work, Colebatch (2014) also gives a warning, that whilst all stakeholders may draw on shared understandings to understand the process of governance, they may not make sense of the issues in the same way.

In his examination of the gap between American accounts of policy and non-American policy practice, Colebatch (2014) noted common themes in effective policy enactment. These included variously-positioned stakeholders developing a shared narrative in order to operate collectively; and policy-makers and -actors paying attention to the range of different discourses in their community, including tolerating ambiguity. Heclo (1974, in Colebatch, 2014:351) describes this as a 'collective puzzling'. This would be a social construction framing of policy and would thus involve seeing as valid the concerns and views of all stakeholders, although enactment would be determined by context (Colebatch, 2006c). In a policy environment where newer members are joining an established community (such as schools joining a MAT), Colebatch (2014:355) noted that whilst new participants could join an existing community, potentially bringing with them significant resources to deploy, they were entering into 'a continuing discourse' and were required to gain the cooperation of the 'established interests'. Richardson and Jordan (1979) found that in their examination of 'policy communities', that amongst stable policy settings, there was relative agreement on the nature of the problem, and ways to address it; but that in new or contested settings, which is more typical of recently-formed MATs, participants needed a shared interpretation, or metanarrative, to account for problems and to validate the response. They also found that more experienced policy participants

sought to develop relationships of trust and understanding with their colleagues and were aware of the various interpretive frameworks within which they needed to negotiate and operate. Parsons (2004:52) argued that good policy making in complex situations, involves 'letting go, fostering innovation, creativity and diversity', which clearly demands a level of trust and confidence in order to 'let go', and to whom. For CEOs and trustees of MATs, policy-making is their responsibility, and the decision of when, whether and to whom, to 'let go' is likely be one of the more difficult decisions they face, with clear implications for all those involved.

Section 3.5 examines in more detail how the theoretical influences set out in this section have underpinned and been applied to this study.

3.5 Application of the theoretical framework to the current study

A qualitative approach, particularly set within an interpretive phenomenology paradigm, privileges individuals' lived experiences, and gives voice to a range of perspectives within the issues under consideration in this study, namely, governance, accountability, legitimacy, autonomy and agency. As such, the study sought to 'explore, describe and analyse the meaning of individual lived experience' (Marshall and Rossman, 2011:19). Listening closely to how people perceived, described, felt, and judged their experiences (Patton, 2002) within the new MAT structure, whatever their role or position, ensuring that every perception counted (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014), was key in understanding how the new governance and accountability structures had affected individuals, and 'made the ordinary visible' (Gunter et al, 2014:6). As with Heidegger's Hermeneutic Circle (Schwandt, 1994), this understanding of individual experiences was a way of understanding the overall key themes and concepts under examination, as set out in the research questions (3.3).

Through a combination of individual one-to-one and small group interviews, through listening to the insider point of view, I was able to attempt to understand the 'complex world of lived experience from the viewpoint of those who live it' (Schwandt, 1994:118). Participants had the opportunity to have their accounts heard, through the facilitation of the researcher, using both guided questioning, but also, allowing individuals to take the discussion in a direction which was important to them. In this sense, as researcher, I was

giving participants the opportunity to engage in Goodman's (1978:163) process of 'ways of worldmaking' on their own terms, whilst I subsequently attempted to make sense of their 'worldmaking' in my further questioning and analysis. During the individual interviews, participants were encouraged to reflect on their own personal and professional history, in order to 'make sense' of the essence of their experiences (e.g., Bruner, 1986; Fuss, 1989; Smith, 2019). As all CEOs, executive principals and several trustees were interviewed individually, it was an opportunity for these participants to explore and discuss their professional (and sometimes personal) journey in forming or joining the MAT. During these interviews, individuals were encouraged to contextualise their current experiences and visions for the future, within their professional history, views, and educational and cultural values (e.g., Colebatch, 2014; Higgs, 2001).

Group interviews were mainly conducted with participants with similar roles (local governors, parents, teachers, senior leaders, trustees, administrative staff). Like the individual interviews, these also presented an opportunity for individuals to place their current experiences of new governance and accountability structures, the degree to which their voices were heard, and opinions sought, and any change in their sense of agency and autonomy, within the context of their own professional and personal history. In addition, underpinned by a social-constructivist approach, the nature of the group interview facilitated the co-construction of views of individual experiences, resulting in the collective generation of meaning, outlined by Gergen (1986), despite likely oppositional understandings (Taylor and Ussher, 2001). Individuals were able to describe their experiences, and then through hearing the experiences of others, modify, challenge, or assimilate those of others in the group, in the way that Schwandt (1994) described as the cycle of inventing concepts, schemes and models. In the theoretical framework of social constructivism, individuals in the group were encouraged to accept that there was no objective truth or empirical realism, and that each person's accounts and experiences were valid, but that there may be disagreement or dissensus of an interpretation of the same event (Goodman, 1984; Taylor and Ussher, 2001). For example, one local governor's experience of a change in professional autonomy may have differed from another's, despite working within the same school system; two parents in the same MAT, may have had very different experiences of meaningful participation in communicating with the

MAT management. Through discussion and listening to each other, participants were able to compare and contrast experiences, 'construct something that work[ed] cognitively' (Goodman, 1978:163), and at times, construct a new experience from this group interpretation.

Through the framework of social constructivism, as researcher, I was able to be 'connoisseur-turned-critic' (Eisner, 1991:86), where I actively debated and exchanged views with the participants (Jackson, 1989). Through my own reconstruction of the collection of experiences, either gathered during one interview, or through a number over time, I was able to present them to either the group or individuals, to ask them to reflect on my interpretations. Thus, the resulting accounts were a co-construction of interpretations of experiences, between the researcher and the researched (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1994). This was a move away from the 'epoche' of van Manen (1990; 2014), and more consistent with the notion of researcher as critical secretary (Apple, 2013; Rowley, 2014), engaging with the concerns and struggles of my participants within the relatively new and sometimes unknown context in which they found themselves. It reflected Smith's (2019) double hermeneutic, as the resulting interpretations integrated both the participants' sense of their lived experiences and the researcher's.

Of importance in making sense of people's experiences, were Husserl's 'horizontal structure of experience' and Schutz's concept of 'stock of knowledge at hand' (Gurwitsch, 1962; Schutz, 1967a). For many of the interviewees, they had had previous (often long) experience of working, governing or being a parent within the school system, and any new experiences resulting from a change of policy, direction, leadership, or governance, would be measured and judged against those former experiences – their 'stock of knowledge'. Likewise, Schutz's notion of 'typification' was relevant in understanding participants' reactions and experiences to any perceived departure of others acting in accordance with their role, and the impact of any ruptured expectations, for example when a former headteacher became the CEO of the MAT, or when a chair of governors had their duties and responsibilities markedly changed.

Policy Enactment Theory has enabled the interpretive accounts of individual experiences to be layered into the contextual dimensions of the policy process, at a micro level (the

academy), at mezzo level (the MAT), and at the macro level of overall government education policy. It has also facilitated the examination of the impact on individuals of the processes involved from policy-making to policy-practice in schools (Maguire et al, 2015). Braun et al's (2011) model of contextual dimensions was a useful framework to understand the importance and impact of a range of factors, on policy decisions and enactment within the MATs in the study. It has also helped in examining the data in relation to the perceived legitimacy of the MAT (RQ3). How legitimate a MAT is perceived to be, is likely to be based on several factors, including reputation and the professional experience and values of those in charge. Applying Braun et al's (2011) contextual dimensions, this would include: the history, location, demographics and reputation of both the MAT and individual academies (*'situated'* context); the values and commitments of more junior staff and local governors, their engagement in policy management, and any tensions between established and embedded values and new policy MAT-wide trends (*'professional'* context); the physical spread of the academies, the location of the central MAT staff and any differences in perception of policy enactment across the academies (*'material'* context); and finally, the relationship that the CEO, in particular, had had with the Department for Education and local authority, and its past test results (*'external'* context).

In both individual and group interviews, it was always likely that there would be both instances of non-contradictory agreement, and occasions where individual experiences would appear to be at odds with those of others (Schutz and Luckmann, 1974), even for individuals in the same role, given the range of contextual factors each brought to their experiences, as 'where you stand depends on where you sit' (Colebatch, 2006b:10). It was my role as researcher to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world (Smith, 2019), including the consensus and contradictions within their accounts. As Colebatch (2006b) noted, even shared understandings of an experience can often lead to a difference in sense-making, amongst individuals. Of particular relevance to this study, was the experience or perception of being part of a new governance and accountability structure, and any possible implications for meaningful involvement (RQ1). The theoretical framework adopted facilitated the identification of evidence or otherwise of a social constructivist approach to policy making, where tolerance of ambiguity of ideas and

discourses (Colebatch, 2014), 'collective puzzling' (Heclo, 1974) and a trust in staff and governors prompted those in charge to 'let go' (Parsons, 2004). Closely linked to this, was the experience of any change in professional autonomy and agency amongst different participants, especially academy leaders and local governors (RQ2). Whilst in this study, the phenomenological approach has given 'voice' to individuals throughout the power structures of the MATs, it would be remiss of the researcher not to take note of the power imbalances within each of these MATs (e.g., Maguire et al, 2011). Ball (1993) notes that framing 'policy as discourse' helps researchers be aware of the potential redistributing or silencing of certain voices, and whose voices are regarded as meaningful or authoritative, and by whom. Accordingly, views on, and experiences of agency and autonomy have been framed within 'policy as discourse' to help understand the phenomena.

This section has focused on the practical application of the theoretical framework and concepts to this research study, demonstrating the relevance of framing the study within a constructivist phenomenological interpretivist approach, alongside policy enactment theory. Section 3.6 explains how the study was conducted.

3.6 Conducting the research

This section will first set out the way the research sites were identified, and then explain how the data was collected. All references to MATs, Local Authorities, academies and individuals have been anonymised, using pseudonyms.

3.6.1 The research sites

To address the research questions, a number of MATs needed to be identified, in which to situate my research and explore the issues under examination. Whilst on the surface, this may have been seen as a case-study approach, it was distinct, as rather than be concerned with the particularities of each academy and the staff within their MAT, the study was focused on studying the experiences of individuals within the MAT, in order to better understand the issues embodied in the research questions. I was particularly seeking MATs which had recently undergone a change; for example, a new MAT, or an established MAT in the process of acquiring new schools. I was also aware that for accessibility of data collection, the sites needed to be within relatively easy travelling distance for me. My initial contact letter explained the purpose of my research, and why I

was interested in their MAT being involved. I explained data collection methods, the ethical protocol, and opportunities for feedback of findings.

The first MAT I approached, I had had no previous contact with, but knew they were undergoing a controversial academy conversion and move towards setting up as a MAT. However, after they declined to participate, with no explanation, I decided to switch my approach to focusing on MATs with which I had some connection. In three cases (Pastures New, Heron Trust and Hazeldene), I contacted the CEOs directly, as I knew them from previous professional experience. In the fourth case (Chalkdown), I contacted the executive principal of a major secondary academy within a local trust and stressed my own professional credentials within the education sector, including working at the LA. In each case, participation in the research was accepted, and welcomed.

The CEO was the first person to be interviewed at Hazeldene, Heron Trust and Pastures New, and they then helped to arrange subsequent interviews with other participants. For Chalkdown, my first contact and interview was with one of the academy executive principals, who then asked his personal assistant to arrange subsequent interviews within that academy, and with the CEO and trust board. Further details of access to participants are given in section 3.6.2.3.

Below, is a brief description of each research site, followed by a summary of the LAs covered by the MATs, and a list of the individual academies covered in this study.

The four research sites:

(i) **Chalkdown MAT** (Figure 3.1) was a medium-sized trust with eight academies, both secondary and primary, within two boroughs, Blackridge and Tollston. Its headquarters were within the grounds of the founding academy in Blackridge, where the CEO had been the headteacher. This site was of interest to my study as it had recently been involved in the re-brokering of a large secondary and two primaries in the borough of Tollston (due to poor performance). These were the first schools in a borough outside of the MAT's headquarters and original borough. There were tensions within the Tollston secondary school as a result of a quick succession of headteachers in only a few years. By Phase 2 of the study, Chalkdown had a total of eleven institutions, including a nursery, spread over three, adjoining boroughs, to include the borough of Eastleigh. Its headquarters had been moved to offices in a different town, but still within Blackridge. The MAT had also changed its name, to reflect the wider spread of their academies. For this study, whilst the CEO and trustees were interviewed, only the academies within Tollston were included.

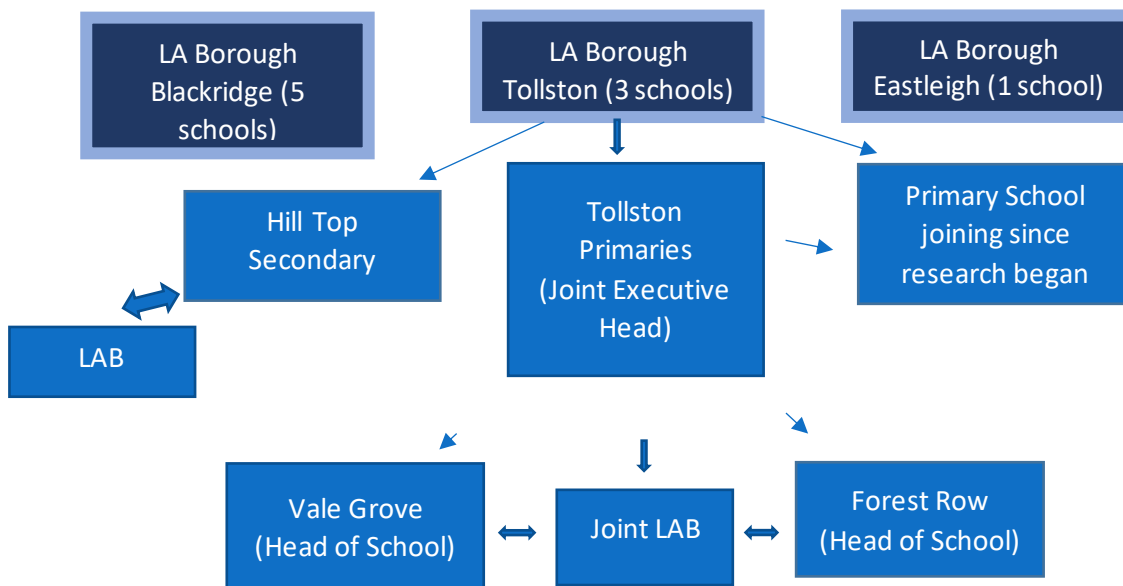


Figure 3.1: Chalkdown MAT

(ii) **Hazeldene MAT** (Figure 3.2) was a very recently-formed MAT, in the borough of Tollston. The CEO was the former headteacher of the original Special primary school. Its catchment area included the whole of Tollston borough, and so was demographically quite mixed. It had changed status from state-maintained school in order to gain more SEND places, which was to be achieved through the plan to build a Free school on their existing site. At the start of the research, Hazeldene had not acquired any other schools, being at an embryonic stage of MAT development, and was still in discussions about the Free school. They were in the process of making many decisions about delineation of governance layers, new roles for staff, and types of schools to take on. Its headquarters were within the founding academy. By Phase 2 of the study, they had acquired one mainstream primary school, but the new Free school had not been built, and the headquarters remained in the founding academy.

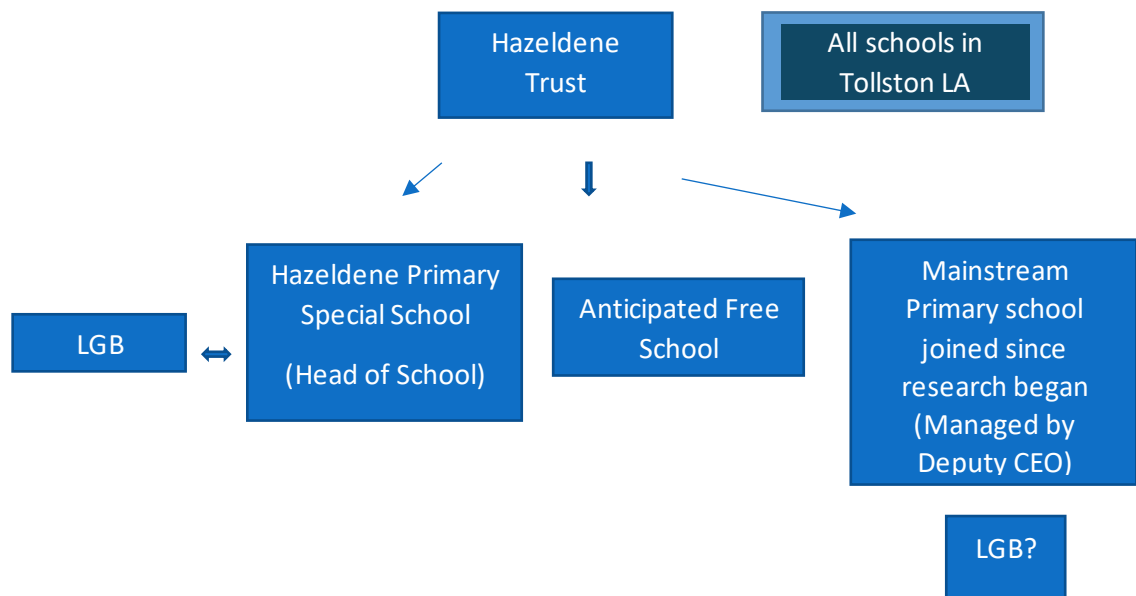


Figure 3.2: Hazeldene MAT

(iii) **Heron MAT** (Figure 3.3) was based in Southam Borough, which adjoined Tollston. It had three large primary academies, all within close proximity, with very similar demographics, with its headquarters being based in one of these academies. At the time of the research, the third primary had just been acquired. The CEO, who had been the headteacher of one of the founding academies, hoped to take on further schools, and was very open to new innovations and opportunities. By Phase 2 of the research, the CEO had retired, and had been replaced by the Executive Principal.

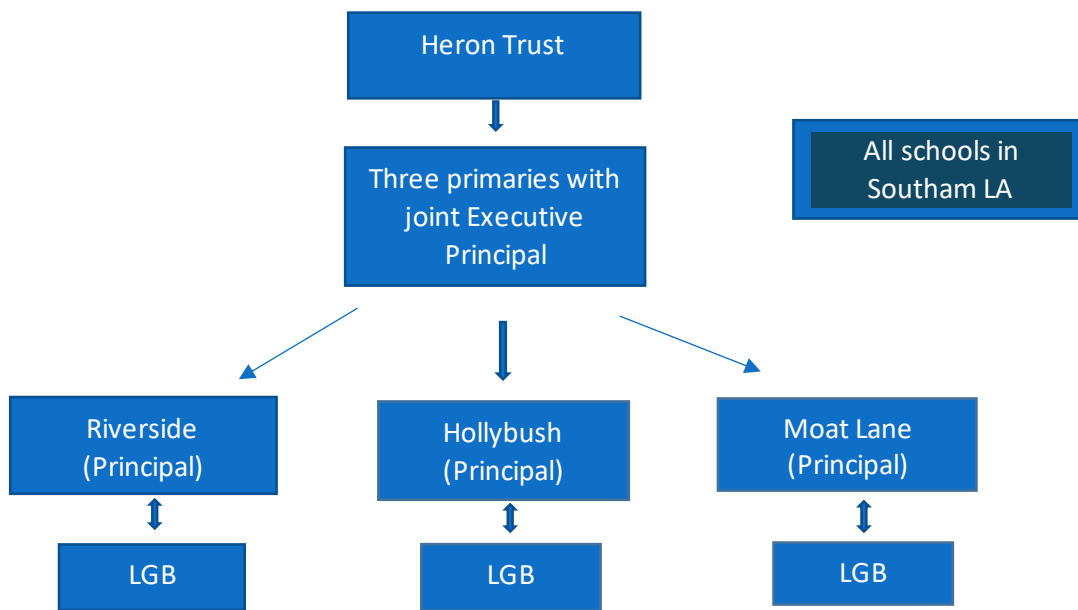


Figure 3.3: The Heron Trust

(iv) **Pastures New MAT** (Figure 3.4) was a Church of England (CfE) MAT, based in Tollston Borough, with its headquarters based in one of the Parish buildings near the founding academy. Its CEO was the former headteacher of the founding academy. At research Phase 1, it had three academies, having just acquired the third. The original two academies were in a similar, rural catchment area, with very similar demographics – mainly medium/high income White-British. The third academy was in an urban setting, with a White-British, but less affluent population.

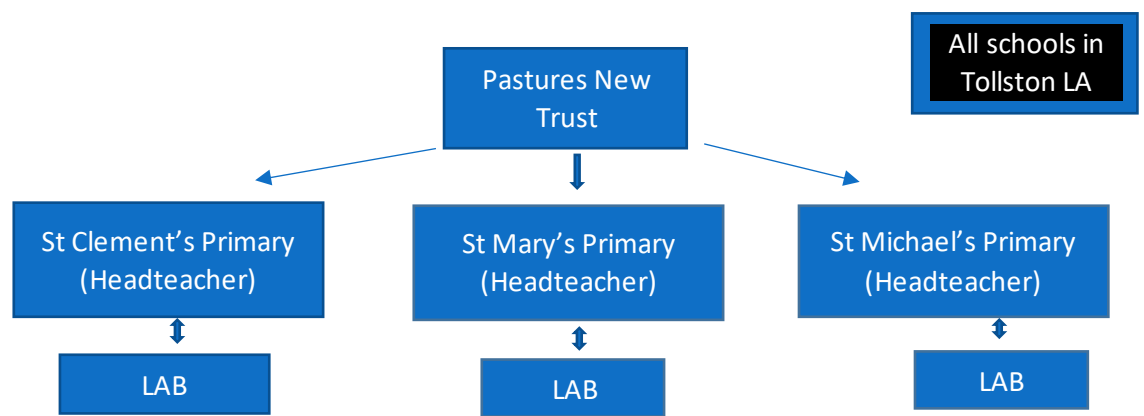


Figure 3.4: Pastures New MAT

The boroughs covered by the MATs: demographics

Tollston LA is a medium-sized metropolitan borough, with an urban/rural mix. Over one fifth (21%) of residents identify as ‘non-white’, with 18% identifying as ‘Asian’ (ONS, 2013).

Southam LA is a large metropolitan, mainly urban borough, with a young, diverse population. Almost a third (30%) of its residents identify as non-white, with 16% identifying as ‘Asian’ (ONS, 2013).

Blackridge LA is a large, metropolitan borough, encompassing a mix of towns and rural areas. 20% of its population identifies as non-white, with 16% identifying as ‘Asian’ (ONS, 2013).

Eastleigh LA is a medium-sized metropolitan borough, encompassing a mix of towns and rural areas. 12% of its population identifies as non-white, with 9% identifying as ‘Asian’ (ONS, 2013).

The academies involved in the research

Only the academies (formerly schools) in the boroughs of Tollston and Southam were involved in the study: no-one in Blackridge or Eastleigh were interviewed, other than the CEO and trustees of Chalkdown. Table 3.1, below, shows the academies involved or mentioned in the study.

Table 3.1: Academies involved in the research

MAT	Academy
Chalkdown (Tollston)	Hill Top Secondary Vale Grove Primary Forest Row Primary
Heron Trust (Southam)	Hollybush Primary Moat Lane Primary Riverside Primary
Pastures New (Tollston)	<i>(NB staff not interviewed, but frequent reference made by CEO and trust board)</i> St Clement’s Primary St Mary’s Primary St Michael’s Primary
Hazeldene (Tollston)	Hazeldene Special Primary Academy

3.6.2 Data collection

This section explains the approach to data collection, including the timings of the two phases of the research. It gives details of the participants involved, the nature and structure of the interview process, the use of MAT and school documentation and my research journal.

3.6.2.1 Overall approach

Working within the theoretical framework described in Section 3.4, and to address the research questions, it was appropriate to employ qualitative methods, using one-to-one and small group interviews, to listen to the experiences and reflections of a range of

people within each MAT, and to build up an understanding and ‘thickly described’ (Geertz, 1973:14) accounts of experiences in relation to governance, accountability, legitimacy, autonomy and agency. This approach would enable the use of a series of strategies recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Miles et al (2020). These were: i) to *identify patterns, themes and trends* in the data, both within the areas under study, and also any new concepts not previously identified in my initial literature trawl; ii) *build logical chains of evidence*, for example, in understanding the impact of structural governance and accountability choices; iii) *make contrasts and comparisons* across the data, for example amongst certain groups of participants, and between different MATs; and iv) *make conceptual and theoretical coherence* in understanding the connections between the theory and data, which I demonstrate in the rest of this chapter. Further contributions to the data, forming a mode of triangulation, included documents related to each MAT (3.6.2.5), and my research journal (3.6.2.6).

3.6.2.2 Structure and timings of the data collection

Primary data was collected through fieldwork using one-to-one and group interviews, during two research phases. Fieldwork took place for Phase 1 from January 2017 to January 2019; and for Phase 2, from October 2019 to February 2020. The purpose of Phase 1 was to collect data in relation to the research questions, from a wide range of stakeholders across the four MATs. Phase 2 was designed to include a longitudinal element to the study, in order to track any changes or progression in views, expectations and circumstances. It also was an opportunity for the participants to hear and comment on preliminary findings, which then contributed to the data. Appendix 5 shows the Phase 2 feedback I gave to two interview groups, along with questions I posed. Phase 2 had been intended to include all MATs from Phase 1, but due to a curtailment of research activity due to Covid 19 in early 2020, this phase only included data from Hazeldene and Chalkdown.

3.6.2.3 Participants

A total of 54 individuals were interviewed for the study, within 23 interviews. Tables 3.2 and 3.3, below, show the number of people interviewed in each MAT, and the role they had. In Phase 1, 52 people were interviewed (Table 3.2). In Phase 2, ten people were interviewed, eight of whom had also been interviewed for Phase 1 (Table 3.3).

Participants were interviewed either individually (denoted by * in the table), or in a group. Some participants held dual roles: for example, a member of the Chalkdown parents' group was also a governor; a member of Hazeldene's administrative group was also a governor; and one of the trustees at Hazeldene was also a governor. However, in the table, they have been assigned to their main research group, to avoid double counting.

Table 3.2: Participants interviewed for Phase 1: January 2017 – January 2019

	CEO*	Trustee	Ex-Sponsor*	LA Officer*	Local governors	School leaders/senior staff	Other teaching staff	Non-teaching staff (admin)	Parents	Total
Chalkdown	1	3*	1		5	4	3	1	2 (1 also a parent-governor)	20
Hazeldene	1	1		1	1 (also a trustee)	3	10 (inc. 3 Teaching Assistants)	2 (one also a governor)	3	22
Heron	1					2				3
Pastures New	1	6								7
ROLE TOTAL	4	10	1	1	6	9	13	3	5	52

Table 3.3: Participants interviewed for Phase 2: October 2019 – February 2020

	CEO	Trustee	Local governors	School leaders and senior MAT staff	Non-teaching staff	Total individuals
Chalkdown			4		1*	5
Hazeldene	1	2	1	1		5
ROLE TOTAL	1	2	5	1	1	10

Below, is a summary of the participants for each phase, their role in their MAT, where the interviews took place, and any other relevant circumstances. By including a wide range of those involved in MATs, from professionals to administrative workers and parents, I was acknowledging their role as 'authentic knowers' (Gunter et al, 2014:159).

Phase 1

Chief Executive Officers (CEOs)

All the CEOs from each trust were interviewed individually, with interviews taking place at a location of the CEOs' choosing, ranging from his/her office to a local café. These interviews were typically long, ranging from 60-100 minutes. To complete the interview with the CEO from Heron Trust, two interviews were needed. In each case, apart from Chalkdown, the CEO was the first person in the MAT to be interviewed, and the subsequent interviews were arranged by them. Prior to the interview with the Chalkdown CEO, I had interviewed some of the senior leadership team, staff and governors at the secondary academy (Hill Top).

Trustees and members

Ten trustees were interviewed in total, including the trust chair from each MAT. The exception to this was Heron Trust, where it proved difficult to secure subsequent interviews, owing to the CEO's very busy schedule, and trying to arrange a mutually convenient time. The occasion never arose, which led to an unfortunate gap in the data, which I address in Section 3.9. Chalkdown trustees had been given my contact details by the CEO's personal assistant, and three trustees contacted me. They were all full-time professionals in a variety of fields, and lived some distance from each other, resulting in individual interviews taking place, each in the participant's home, which for one, was also his office. At Hazeldene Trust, the trust chair and vice-chair had been invited by their CEO to participate in the study and were interviewed together. There was some overlap of roles, as the trust chair had previously been the LGB chair, and the current LGB chair was also trust vice-chair, although there was some question over whether this was technically permissible. This interview took place in an office in the founding school. At Pastures New, the trust chair, after having been given my details by the CEO, confirmed that all six of the trust board (a mix of trustees and members) would like to participate. Some of

these trustees were still in full-time work, and others had retired. One trustee had recently resigned from one of the academy's governing boards (St Mary's), to avoid a conflict of interest. This did, however, allow a local governor perspective to be included in the discussion. The interview took place in a conference room at the founding school (St Clement's).

These interviews typically lasted 60-90 minutes. All participants appeared very willing to be involved in the study, keen to give their experiences and views on the issues under discussion.

Local governors

Eight local governors were interviewed: six from Chalkdown and two from Hazeldene. At Chalkdown, all six governors were from the same school, Hill Top Secondary Academy, and the interviews had been arranged by the executive principal's PA. Three governors were interviewed as a local governor group; a fourth was part of the staff group (despite not being a teacher-governor); the parent governor was interviewed as part of the parent group; and the sixth governor was interviewed individually, as a community governor. This governor had intended to be part of a larger community members group, but the others declined to be involved. At Hazeldene, whilst there was not an exclusive governors' group, two governors were involved in other interview groups: one of the trustees was also chair of the LGB, so that perspective was heard in the trustees group; another governor was interviewed in the non-teaching group, as administrative support, and again, she was able to give her perspective on the two roles. At Pastures New, as mentioned earlier, one of the trustees had recently retired from St Mary's LGBs, so was able to give her governor's perspective. It is unfortunate that no governors at Heron Trust were available for interview.

Interviews typically lasted one hour. All governors seemed willing to be part of the study and were keen to talk about their experiences. Interviews took place in a private room on school premises.

Senior academy leaders

A total of nine academy leaders were interviewed. At Chalkdown, the two executive principals, one from Hill Top Secondary Academy, and one overseeing Vale Grove and Forest Row Primary Academies, were interviewed individually. The two heads-of-school from these primaries were interviewed together. Despite his seniority, an Assistant Head at Hill Top was interviewed as part of the 'Other teaching staff group' (see below). The three school leaders from Hazeldene were interviewed as a group, together with a non-teaching 'director'. Two academy principals from Heron Trust were interviewed together. The principal from the third academy, who was also the executive principal of all three, had been due to attend, but was unavailable on the day. No school leaders from Pastures New were interviewed: I had hoped to include them in Phase 2 of the research in 2020, until Covid 19 prevented that.

All interviews took place on school premises, and typically lasted over an hour. Two interviews took place in quick succession with the Executive Principal of Hill Top, to follow up some of the issues he had raised.

Other teaching staff

Thirteen non-leadership teaching staff were interviewed. At Chalkdown, the group comprised a class teacher, a head of department, an assistant head, and also two non-teaching members – the executive principal's PA, and a local governor. Whilst the inclusion of these last two was unexpected, their experiences were welcome, although in the paragraph below, I refer to the implications of having mixed levels of seniority within a group. At Hazeldene, seven class teachers were interviewed as one group, and three classroom support/specialist staff in another group. All interviews took place on school premises in interview rooms, and typically lasted 45 - 50 minutes.

Non-teaching staff

Three non-teaching staff were interviewed. At Chalkdown, one administrative worker was included in the staff group interview, noted above. This individual mentioned to me after the interview that she had felt a little reluctant to contribute to the group, because of the presence of some senior leaders; she then gave me additional information which I

recorded as an addendum to the transcript of the group interview. At Hazeldene, two administrative staff were interviewed together, one of whom was also a staff governor, and the other was Clerk to the LGB. They were thus able to discuss their experiences from multiple perspectives. All interviews took place on school premises, lasting 45–60 minutes.

Parents

Five parents were interviewed: two from Chalkdown, one of whom was also a parent governor, so again, I was able to hear a dual-perspective; and three from Hazeldene. Interviews took place on school premises, lasting around 55 minutes.

Additional participants

I interviewed two other individuals who had been involved in two of the research sites, prior to the study. One was the ex-sponsor of Chalkdown and head of a local college in Tollston. I arranged this interview independently of the Chalkdown personnel, but with their knowledge and consent, and the interview took place at his workplace. On the suggestion of Hazeldene's CEO, I interviewed an LA officer who had worked very closely with the original school when they had been converting to academy status, and later when they were forming the MAT. This interview took place at Hazeldene.

Phase 2

I returned to Chalkdown and Hazeldene to give participants feedback on my initial findings (Appendix 5), and to hear their experiences since we had last met. I had also hoped to return to Pastures New and Heron Trust, but my full-time work commitments, followed by the Covid 19 lockdown and subsequent consequences prevented this. Whilst this means that the data clearly has limitations, the interviews I had with each group were very enlightening as to the progress and changes that had occurred since Phase 1. This is discussed in more detail in Section 3.9.

At Chalkdown, I had initially agreed to meet with the Executive Principal of Hill Top, to share a document of initial findings (Appendix 5b). However, on arrival at the school, he was unavailable. Instead, I had a discussion with a member of the administrative staff, who had been involved in the Phase 1 interviews, and this data has been used in my

analysis. Other Chalkdown participants from Phase 1 were then invited to discuss findings, and this offer was accepted by three of the governors. We were joined by the LAB chair, who had not been in Phase 1 and was keen to talk about her experiences.

At Hazeldene, the CEO arranged a group interview with four participants from Phase One – herself, the trust chair, the LGB chair, and a senior director; also present was a newly-appointed Deputy CEO. I shared my emerging findings, both in relation to Hazeldene, and to the overall study (Appendix 5a), which prompted a debate which has contributed to the data.

It should be noted that in Phase 2, because the make-up of the groups was not identical to Phase 1, the group dynamics in each site was slightly different from Phase 1, and this could clearly have had an impact on how individuals related their experiences.

The next section discusses in depth the process of conducting interviews as the prime data collection source.

3.6.2.4 Interviews

To thoroughly explore the issues central to the research questions, my primary data collection method was through semi-structured interviews. Unlike survey interviews, where the interviewer has a series of questions to ask the participant, not deviating from the schedule, the qualitative interview (or ‘indepth’ interview) has an informal, conversational style, which is shaped by both the interviewer’s research interest and topic guide, and issues and concerns which arise, possibly unexpectedly, through the social interaction with the participant(s) (e.g., Bloor and Wood, 2006). In the traditions of Schutz (1967a; 1967b) and Cicourel (1964), as a qualitative interviewer, I was seeking to create an ‘intersubjective bridge’ between myself and the participants (Bloor and Wood, 2006:98), to share and describe the respondent’s world and their experiences. Similarly, constructivists would argue that both interviewer and interviewee together construct an interpretation of their social world. A semi-structured interview has pre-determined issues to explore, and questions to pose, and thus assigns a somewhat directive role to the interviewer. However, unlike a structured interview, there is greater acknowledgement of the influence of the social interaction context in which the interviews are taking place. There is also flexibility in which questions are asked, and the

way they are asked, with the interviewer having an awareness of the voices and feelings of the respondents (Marcus and Fischer, 1986). Prior to starting the data collection, I had conducted desk research on each research site, to appreciate the local context, the site's history, and to frame my questions within this knowledge. Using this, and the themes identified in the literature review, I constructed a series of questions and points to explore with the participants, whilst mindful that the conversation could lead in different directions, depending on interviewees' experiences. Appendix 4 shows various examples of interview schedules.

I used both individual and group interview formats, depending on the role of the participants, or practical circumstances. As there was only one CEO in each MAT, each of these interviews was conducted individually, as were some interviews with trustees, because of their lack of geographical proximity with each other. For most of the other participants, group interviews were conducted, largely organised by their role in the MAT. Some exceptions to this have been detailed in 3.6.2.3 above. Individual interviews gave an opportunity to explore in greater detail the respondent's experiences, and to probe for further expansion and interpretation, without fear of 'holding up' the accounts and experiences of others. It also presented the opportunity to research sensitive topics, where a group may have acted as an inhibitor, or where a participant may have been mindful of not hurting the feelings of others. The group interview, on the other hand, as a social-constructivist arena, presented a 'cumulative and elaborative' experience (Fontana and Frey, 1994:365), where participants built on each other's accounts of experiences, aided recall, and provided the possibility to challenge, agree, and disagree. It was an opportunity for me as interviewer, and each of the participants to engage in 'exploratory talk', where there was critical but constructive consideration of ideas (Mercer and Dawes, 2008). Schostak (2006:45), in his critique of case study research, but also relevant to the group interviews within a phenomenological framework, urges interviewers to note if there is 'a gelling, knotting, articulation of signifiers so that an organized social space emerges to view', or indeed if anyone lies outside of this space. This calls for heightened observational skills on the part of the interviewer, in addition to group management, in terms of dynamics, ensuring everyone has the opportunity to contribute, and avoiding

the over-dominance of any single participant (e.g., Bogdan and Biklen, 2006; Fontana and Frey, 1994).

Whether individual or group interview, I was mindful of what is considered to be the essence of the phenomenological interview:

‘Growing quiet and listening; [...] connecting with a dominant question, issue, or concern related to a specific person (including one's own self), or a situation or event; considering possible meanings; and arriving at an understanding of the essences of the experience’ (Moustakas, 1994:63).

The experiences of participants within the group interview were equally valid as personal, individual experiences, as much as they were in contributing to the group's discussion, reasoning and conclusions.

Prior to the interviews, I had sent participants an information sheet (Appendix 2), detailing the nature and purpose of the study, why they had been invited, practical details of data collection and storage, and contact details of my MMU supervisor, should there be a complaint. Once happy to participate, they signed and returned a consent form (Appendix 3), in the knowledge that they could withdraw from the research at any stage. As the participants were entitled to know how and why their personal data was being stored, to what uses it was being put and to whom it may be made available (BERA, 2018), and in compliance with the legal requirements of the Data Protection Act (UK Government, 2018) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Commission, 2018), I explained that the interview would be recorded on a digital recorder, and stored in an encrypted site until transcriptions and analysis were completed, when the recordings would be destroyed. I explained that the main uses of the data would be for my doctoral thesis but could also include papers and presentations for academic journals and conferences, book chapters, and references in my own teaching. I made clear that all references to their names and sites would be anonymised.

The interviews began with me introducing myself and my background, reiterating the purpose of the study, thanking them for giving up their time, and that the interview should be around an hour. In group interviews, we tended to sit around a table, where everyone could see each other. For individual interviews, we tended to sit opposite each

other at a table. I tested the recorder and explained that I would switch it off whenever asked, or if we were interrupted, and that I would redact anything if requested. I explained that my interview schedule was a guide, rather than dictating the discussion, and that I was happy for them to take up a point and explore that in more detail, regardless of the schedule. I was also at pains to be clear that all their contributions were valid (e.g., Moustakas, 1994), and that they were an important contribution to new knowledge on the issues under discussion. Once recording began, each participant introduced themselves, and their role in the MAT. Subsequent questions then aimed to cover at a minimum the following themes: clarity of own role and those of others; personal experience of governance and accountability and their perception of its transparency; experience of being part of a MAT (and compared to any previous system, where appropriate); involvement of the local community and parents; feelings of identity, agency and autonomy, and any changes since MAT-status; hopes and expectations for the future of the MAT, and their place in it. There were times when the interview became more of a debate, where ideas were exchanged and tested. In this sense, one could say the interview was 'placing [my] ideas on a par with [the participants']', testing them not against predetermined standards or rationality but against the immediate exigencies of life' (Jackson, 1989:14). It was also an example of Eisner's (1991:86) inquirer as 'connoisseur-turned-critic', where I was reconstituting the participants' original experiences, rather than merely holding up a mirror to them. In the group interviews, sometimes I would ask a question to the whole group, and one, several or all participants would answer; at others, as a follow-up question, I might focus on one respondent, to explore their perspective and experience in more depth. In a group, there was a responsibility on me as researcher and facilitator to manage the group dynamics: to try to ensure everyone had a chance to speak, that no-one dominated the conversation or recounting of experiences, and that any sensitive information that was revealed was dealt with sympathetically. This was particularly the case when there were different power relationships within the group (see Section 3.9).

Interviews conducted on an individual basis, such as those with the CEOs and some trustees, were slightly more free-flowing. They had an element of a life-history narrative approach (e.g., Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007; Crow and

Møller, 2017; Crow et al, 2017), as I wanted to hear about their experiences in moving towards educational leadership, their motivations for and experiences in starting up or joining the MAT, and how this might have been influenced by their professional journey and education values.

Examples of such questions to CEOs:

‘Can you tell me a little bit about what brought you into teaching, what were/are your ambitions, and what excites and inspires you?’

‘Can you describe your pathway to leadership?’

‘What kind of leader do you like to see yourself as? [...] How do you think others see you now that you are CEO?’

Examples of some questions to trustees:

‘Why did you want to be a trustee, and how were you appointed?’

‘What do you feel you personally bring to the MAT?’

‘How important do you think it is for your MAT to have [a trustee] with an education background?’

Some questions were asked of all participants, whereas others were modified to take account of the role of participants. For example, in relation to experiences and perceptions of accountability, all participants were asked the following questions:

‘What are your impressions on the degree of transparency of accountability within the Trust structures?’ and

‘Are there any issues which you would like to see discussed more openly across the layers of governance?’

For trustees and staff members, I asked these additional questions:

‘Who knows what is going on [in terms of accountability], and do you think that is appropriate?’

‘Is there a meaningful way to include that “localness” – the local voice?’

For parents, these were examples of additional questions:

'Are you aware that there are various levels of governance now at [MAT]?'

'What could be done to have your voice, views and opinions listened to more?'

The earliest interviews guided the topics I raised, and my way of questioning in subsequent interviews; for example, in the case of my feeling that a question was not really addressing the essence of the research questions, or not allowing the participants to reflect deeply on their experiences. Also, on occasions, interesting data was revealed in one interview that I then wanted to explore with other participants in more detail (e.g., Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). The iterative nature of the analysis (see Section 3.7) allowed me to do initial analysis on an interview, which I then used to explore particular points of interest, either in a second interview with that individual or group, in interviews with different participants, or in Phase 2 of the study. This is an example of Goodman's (1978) 'worldmaking', where each case can elicit and implement further inquiry and invention, as in this question:

'Someone in another interview described the LGB as being more like "observers", than having any real say in the running of the school. Can you comment on this, in your experience?' (Interview with Trust Board Chair).

And this question where I returned in Phase 2 to interview the CEO and trust board of Hazeldene together, where I picked up on a point someone had made in the interview in Phase 1 about taking on new schools:

'There was an issue about how you would bring on staff from a school which could be reluctant [...]. John, you gave a lovely phrase about "building a bridge" [with joining schools]. Do you think a bridge has been built between [those] staff?' (Phase 2, Hazeldene).

I was aware that I was conducting the research in what, for some participants, could have been regarded as a politically charged setting (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007), given the controversy surrounding the Academies Programme (e.g., Gunter and McGinty, 2014). Consequently, whilst sometimes being involved in the debate, I also attempted to follow the following advice to:

‘Listen carefully and talk very little. When asking questions, phrase them carefully. It is best to remain neutral, otherwise it will be difficult to have access to, and to understand “the other side”’ (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007:100).

However, notwithstanding the importance of adopting a certain degree of neutrality, I was also mindful of the criticism levelled at the interviewer seen variously as ‘unattached intelligentsia’ (Apple, 2013); as standing aside, ‘neutral and indifferent’ (Bourdieu, 2003:11); of the need to ‘come down off the balcony’ (Rowley, 2014:52) to critically engage with the concerns of the participants; and to adopt a critical mode which develops curiosity in respondents and the themes which were important to them (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This raises issues about my positionality as researcher, and a critique is offered in Section 3.8.1.

3.6.2.5 MAT and academy documentation

In preparation for each set of interviews, I read recent Ofsted reports for the MATs’ academies, and details of membership of their trust boards. I accessed public documents which threw light on their academisation and MAT development process, including the MAT sponsorship process, consultations with parents and staff, and online LGB minutes (where available). Once the interviews began, CEOs and executive principals shared other documents relating to the structure of the MAT, such as: their Schemes of Delegation, the Governors’ Code of Conduct, Ethos and Values Statements, Mission Statements, corporate plans, and flow charts to show governance structure and accountability. One group interview with parents resulted in their sharing a new Parent Think Tank questionnaire, which was designed to give parents a voice and facilitate networking. Having these background documents helped to contextualise the interview data during analysis and gave me a greater understanding of the policy environment within which individuals were operating (e.g., Colebatch, 2014; Lincoln et al, 2011; Maguire et al, 2015).

3.6.2.6 Research journal

A further data source was my research journal, which I kept throughout the study. I detailed date, location and duration of interviews, and any information I felt added to my understanding of what was being said. It also included my attendance and presentations at conferences, publications in relation to my data, and seminal points in the supervision

process, which significantly influenced my thinking and direction. The journal tracks my growing confidence in my role as researcher-interviewer, and impact this had on adopting a more focused approach in the later interviews, as this entry illustrates:

'I notice how much better my interviews are becoming as time goes on. I think this is because a) I can weave into my questions things previous interviewees have said to me and ask current interviewees to comment; b) I am gaining more confidence and am knowing more about individual MATs and about MAT structure generally; c) I am narrowing my focus, or starting to get a feel for what I want to probe, which means I ask deeper questions, rather than a wider, broad-brush approach, which I did initially. Also, I am not afraid to put uncomfortable questions to them now, and challenge them' (Research Journal entry, 1.8.18).

At times, the journal showed how I thought participants were responding and reacting to the interview process itself, and the impact this had on how they related their experiences, such as this example, when I had intended to run a trustee group interview, but distance between participants prevented this, and so a 1-to-1 interview was arranged for each of the three participants. These are my comments after one of them, with 'Anna':

'I think the 1-to-1 gave her the time to really think and reflect, get her thoughts 'in order', without distraction by, or concession to anyone else's views. She said at one point in the interview, "so this is starting to inform my own reasoning now", in reference to my line of questioning, and she acknowledged that some of my questions were difficult, but important to answer. I personally felt comfortable with her, maybe because we are both academics in the education field, and we seem to hold similar views on, and reservations about MATs. This probably has a bearing on the type of questions I feel emboldened to ask. There are also quite a lot of question tags Anna uses, to get affirmation from me, e.g., 'isn't it', 'doesn't it', and she uses the pronoun 'we' possibly more than some other interviewees' (Research Journal entry, 24.7.18).

This also shows how I felt researcher and participant felt comfortable together because of their shared experiences and views on the issues central to the study. However, it also raises issues about my assumptions and preconceptions, which I discuss in relation to my researcher positionality in both this chapter in 3.8.1, and in Chapter 8, Section 8.2, in the context of the data analysis and its implications.

3.7 Data Analysis

This section examines my choice of a thematic analytical framework for the data and details the process I used to arrive at the final themes for analysis of the findings.

3.7.1 Analytical framework: Thematic analysis

As the study is set within a phenomenological-interpretative/constructivist theoretical framework, it was appropriate that my analytical framework would be consistent with this. I wanted to examine individual experiences, describe them, and then frame them within the parameters of the research questions. The essence of my research was to identify participants' experiences of governance, accountability, legitimacy, autonomy and agency, and to make sense of this, within the social and political context of their world. Across the data set, I would be searching for commonalities and differences in experiences, identifying patterns, and aiming to interpret these, seeking repeated patterns of meaning. A thematic analysis is designed to support this aim (e.g., Braun and Clarke, 2006), and is consistent with addressing the research questions within my theoretical framework.

Through analysis, I sought to identify patterns both 'within and across data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives, and behaviour and practices' (Clarke and Braun, 2017:297). The 'within data' analysis aimed to explore individual experiences of governance, accountability, autonomy and agency. It also used each MAT as a unit of analysis, in that it identified how the particular circumstances of the individual MAT influenced the choices made in relation to structures and practices of governance and accountability, and how that affected the individuals in the MAT. The 'across data' analysis was used in two ways. First, to study the interplay of the experiences and positionings of different individuals within a MAT, particularly looking at their role, in relation to the key research questions. Second, to examine themes and patterns identified across the entire data set, thus enabling the data to be used to explore issues common and pertinent to certain participant groups, whichever the MAT.

As a flexible research tool, thematic analysis has the potential to provide a rich, detailed account of the data, whilst not compromising the complexity (Braun and Clarke, 2006) by being too generalistic. Braun and Clarke (2006) recognise two strands to thematic analysis: inductive and deductive or theoretical, both of which my study included.

Inductive thematic analysis is essentially 'data-driven', in that the themes identified are strongly linked to the data, rather than fitting into a pre-existing coding frame. This is consistent with my approach to the data analysis, as it was driven by personal experiences of the 'essence' of the research questions. Although, as Braun and Clarke (2006) acknowledge, no data coding is done in an epistemological vacuum, and I have previously stated my own interest in this area. Using inductive thematic analysis, I was able to identify themes which the research questions did not explicitly address, but which I subsequently interpreted as being of value. These 'new' themes served two purposes. First, to add a richer layer of understanding and interpretation to the initial research questions; and second, to generate a new research question on legitimacy of the MAT, which was both a significant issue for participants, and, also very important in understanding the themes raised through the other research questions. Theoretical thematic analysis tends to be driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytical interest in the area and is more explicitly 'analyst-driven'. This entails a coding system being driven by pre-conceived themes, and not necessarily examining data which fell outside of the initial research questions. In my case, this meant I examined each of the interviews for themes emerging which I thought of relevance to the key themes in the research questions. Theoretical thematic analysis builds upon previous research in the areas of interest and contributes to an existing body of work, which this study has done.

Within a thematic analysis, the researcher can examine the themes at either the semantic or latent level, or a combination of the two, which was my approach. At a semantic level, working within the phenomenological framework, I looked at the explicit or surface meanings of the data, without examining too closely anything beyond what a participant had said: I let the data, in the form of individual experience, speak for itself. However, even with this approach, it was at times necessary to interpret and theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications, and to place this in the context of previous literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006). At the latent level, working within a framework of constructivism and policy enactment theory, I examined and identified the underlying ideas, conceptualisations and assumptions within the data, and so sought to 'theorize the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable[d] the individual accounts that [were] provided' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:85). The

following section sets out how the various stages of my thematic analysis approach were used to explore, understand and interpret the data.

3.7.2 Method of analysis

Familiarising myself with the data

Straight after each interview, I made notes in my research journal, to capture items of importance which would not be in the transcription. These included, physical conditions of the setting, how I was received and welcomed, any 'no-shows', if anyone present had been there under duress, dynamics within a group interview, and how I had felt during the interview. The following extract is an example of this, following an interview with staff at Hill Top Academy (Chalkdown):

'The Exec P asked for volunteers to be interviewed. Several came forward, but when no-one from the SLT volunteered, he asked one of his Assistant Principals. This person was a fairly reluctant presence in the room, saying little at first, but eventually talking quite passionately about the Exec P's effectiveness, and the need to 'buy in' to school's values and mission' (Research Journal, February 2017).

I aimed to transcribe interviews as soon as possible, to remember the experience with the participant(s). Bird (2005:227) regards the transcribing of the spoken word as 'a key phase of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology', where meanings are created, rather than simply a mechanical act of putting speech onto paper (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999). Transcribing the interviews, I took myself back to the occasion, to remember how participants were behaving, noting any paralinguistic cues, pauses, tone of voice, and during group interviews the interactions with each other, such as turn-taking, talking over someone, affirmation of a point, etc.

Next, I immersed myself in the data, by repeated readings, and searching for meanings and patterns, both within a single participant's account, and between participants in group interviews. At this stage I made notes on the printed transcripts, identifying where I saw similar themes emerging: this was the start of my initial coding process. I also made a list of themes I was starting to identify. This changed many times during the reading and re-reading process, and the initial analysis. Below, is a discussion of my data analysis pathway, in six stages.

Pathway of my analysis: generating codes, searching for, and reviewing themes

This pathway was an iterative, rather than a linear process, necessitating continual critical evaluation of my methods and findings at each stage, returning to previously-coded data, reviewing and refining my understanding and interpretation of the participants' experiences. On each reading of the transcripts, I found something new of interest, or brought a fresh understanding to what had been said.

Stage 1: Identifying initial themes (Autumn 2017 – Spring 2018)

I studied in detail three transcripts from interviews at Hazeldene MAT: trustees, parents and CEO. From these, I identified several points of interest, which I marked with a code number on the transcripts. During this process, I kept referring back to the transcripts, which resulted in my combining some codes, and moving others around, where they seemed to fit better. The result was the identification of 14 initial themes (Table 3.4).

Table 3.4: Initial themes from a preliminary analysis of three transcripts (Autumn 2017 – Spring 2018)

	Theme
1	Circumstantial appointments
2	New structure and roles and accountability
3	Becoming informed on the MAT process
4	Deficit of Trust's understanding of the school and lack of governor experience
5	Communication and visibility, including consultation on academisation process
6	A change in relationships when new schools join the MAT
7	Negotiating and building relationships
8	Types of schools joining the MAT
9	Identity
10	What's in it for the existing MAT?
11	Reason for converting to academy status
12	Freedoms
13	The future
14	Hierarchy amongst schools

I then assigned quotes to each of these themes (colour-coded by interview), showing links across themes (see example in Appendix 6).

Stage 2: Coding using NVivo (Spring/Summer 2018)

With the identified themes in Table 3.4, I used the qualitative data coding package, NVivo. NVivo is used for organising, coding and analysing large sets of data, typically from interview transcripts. I entered a series of transcripts from the other research sites into the system, examined them in detail for instances of the identified themes, then coded these using the NVivo software. Through this process, I reduced the themes to seven, made them 'nodes', or principal categories, and added some sub-categories (Table 3.5).

Table 3.5: First NVivo coding analysis using nodes (Spring-Summer 2018)

Main categories ('nodes')	Sub-categories
<i>Communication and visibility</i>	
<i>Conversion process</i>	
<i>Growing and evolving</i>	New sponsorship Types of schools joining the MAT What's in it for the MAT?
<i>Identity and autonomy – leaders and governors</i>	Emotional Epistemic Historic and cultural Narrative dimension Political
<i>Negotiating and building relationships</i>	
<i>New structures and roles and accountability</i>	

I used the themes in Table 3.5 to code one of the longest interviews (22 pages, with the CEO of Chalkdown). However, during this process, I decided that using NVivo was very time-consuming, and that in some way it was taking me away from really reading and understanding the data: it seemed at odds with the phenomenological framework that I was using. I decided that for my next substantial interviews I would make hand-written notes, compare the two different methods, and choose the one more suited to my approach before continuing with further analysis.

Stage 3: Continuing with coding and reviewing themes (Summer 2018)

Following individual interviews with the three trustees from Chalkdown in July 2018, I did a detailed analysis of each of their transcripts. I made notes in my journal on my first thoughts, using the themes I had identified in Tables 3.4 and 3.5. Following this analysis, I made these observations in my research journal:

'So, this is again looking at meaningful relationships, interacting with others, understanding of different perspectives, positions, motivations, passions and what makes the whole person.'

'How these are influenced or informed by values and ethos. How does the power dynamic unsettle, undermine or support the forming of these relationships?'

'How are peripheral voices included in these relationships? Are they? Who cares?'
(Research Journal, August 2018).

I found this 'paper' method of analysis more conducive to understanding my data, and so continued with this method for the next stage of analysis.

Stage 4: Bringing data together for each MAT through Pen Portraits (Sept-Oct 2018)

To try to understand what the important themes were for each of the research sites, using all the above analysis, I wrote a pen-portrait for each MAT (see Appendix 7 for an example). I identified themes specific to each research site, some of which used the labels of themes already identified, and some which were through combining existing themes. I finished this process by identifying three questions, below, which I thought important in starting to address the research questions, and would also be points of discussion with my supervision team:

'Will a MAT only have integrity and legitimacy if it has an experienced, 'principled' educator at the top? And if it doesn't, what are the implications for fostering positive relationships and an acceptable degree of autonomy throughout the MAT?'

'Whose responsibility is it to ensure that trustees have 'an understanding of the nature of the education system, rather than making it look like a factory' (trustee comment)?'

'How can local issues and concerns be addressed, in a way that maintains individual agency, without diminishing the 'point' of the MAT?'

Stage 5: Identification of three key themes (Autumn 2018 – Summer 2019)

Using the Pen Portraits, I attempted to bring the themes down to fewer, key areas, each of which would form a section heading in my thesis, along with 'sub-themes'. I spent several months deciding on the names of both main themes and sub-themes, re-reading and examining the data, and made many changes the deeper I engaged with the data.

The resulting themes and sub-themes are listed in Table 3.6, below.

Table 3.6: Identification of three key themes, with sub-themes (July 2019)

Theme	Sub-theme
<i>Legitimacy</i>	Motivation, expertise and skills of the trust board. The shift in power dynamics between local and over-arching bodies: the diminishing of local voice.
<i>Building cohesion</i>	Clarity and understanding of new roles and lines of accountability. The complexities of intra-MAT relationships: building trust and a shared understanding. Earning responsibility and autonomy: room for negotiation.
<i>Models of education</i>	Lines of accountability, governance and agency. Implications for leadership.

Stage 6: Refining themes following Phase 2 (Summer 2020)

As I moved from writing up my findings, to more thorough analysis of the data set, and began to collect Phase 2 data, I found the data presented new insights. Following discussion with my supervision team, I looked more closely at the data to align more tightly the themes against the research questions. I also needed to be sure that the themes were coherent and distinct from each other (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017), and that they would work across the whole data set, rather than just certain participant groups, or research sites (e.g., Braun and Clarke, 2006; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). I was also aware that, following a phenomenological or hermeneutic understanding of the data, any parts of a transcript I had identified as interesting or relevant, must be seen within the context of the whole script. Holloway and Todres (2003:350) warn against using a computer data analysis package which can divert attention in a way that ‘over-emphasizes a concern with the “parts” and obscures the intuition of the “whole”’. Consequently, I revised my thematic map, presenting a more nuanced set of themes (see Appendix 8), re-visited NVivo, compiling a new set of nodes to reflect my new thinking and paying attention to the holistic experiences emerging, and constructed a final set of themes which I subsequently used as headings in my data presentation (Table 3.7).

Table 3.7: Final themes (2020-2021)

Theme	Sub-themes
<i>Systems and lines of governance and accountability.</i>	The MATs' governance structures and roles of responsibility; Transparency and clarity over the new governance and accountability structures.
<i>Marginalisation of the local voice in governance: implications for autonomy and agency.</i>	Reduction in local democratic representation; A deficit of local knowledge and moves to address this; Put up or shut up: dealing with reduced accountability; In a hybrid place of accountability without holding power.
<i>Balancing central control and professional autonomy: the importance of building relationships and developing trust.</i>	Relationship-building between the MAT and joining schools; The benefits and drawbacks of a centralised system for academy staff; A need for leaders to demonstrate responsibility with autonomy.
<i>What does legitimacy look like for MATs?</i>	Authority legitimised through appropriate knowledge and expertise, and a plurality of views; Legitimacy through the underpinning values and ethos of the MAT.

This constant examination of the data, reviewing of themes, questioning their relevance to the research questions, and wanting to be confident that the themes I was identifying were representative of the 'essence' of my participants' experiences, was implicit to the phenomenological-interpretive theoretical framework, and to the inductive and iterative approach to the thematic analysis, which predicates analysis being driven by the data, rather than having pre-conceived themes.

Having explained the relevance of my analytical framework to the research questions and aims of the study, and demonstrated its application to my data, I now turn to the importance of research integrity and ethics within the study.

3.8 Research integrity and ethics

In conducting any research, the researcher needs to be mindful of the impact this will have on the participants, both during the interview, and longer-term. Being open about the motivation and purpose of the research, the data collection and subsequent publication of findings, and the expected contribution to understanding of the issues under examination, are all part of building a trusting and respectful relationship between the inquirer and the researched. Conducting the research with integrity and having ethical awareness involves demonstrating care and respect for those involved and affected by the research (Burton and Bartlett, 2009). Prior to the start of the study, I

submitted my proposal to the MMU Ethics Committee, for formal ethical scrutiny, to ensure confidence within my academic colleagues and within the non-academic community I would be working with. Throughout the study, I followed the MMU Ethical Protocol (MMU, 2022), and BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines for educational research, bearing in mind that ethical decision-making is not a one-off event occurring only at the beginning of the study: rather, it is an ongoing, iterative process of assessment and reassessment of the situation and any issues which may arise (BERA, 2018). I made my participants aware of these guidelines, should they want further information and reassurance. The following section will discuss the ethical issues around my positionality; engendering trust and recognising vulnerabilities; and the validity and credibility of the study.

3.8.1 Positionality and trust

As stated in Chapter 1 (Section 1.2), I have a multi-layered research positionality as an educationalist. This positioned me as someone with dual insider/outsider status, enabled access, and supported a trusting relationship with participants, ensuring that contact could be maintained with various key figures working in sometimes new and challenging circumstances over a substantial period. Trust is an essential element within the relationship between the researcher and participants (BERA, 2018). As Armstrong (2014:75) identified, the 'repeated encounters' to the research site, facilitated 'mutual familiarity', which strengthened the level of trust and degree of risk-taking each participant calculated could be made. By conducting intimate interviews with a range of individuals within the research sites over a sustained period, I argue that I was able to construct a trusted reputation, resulting in participants being 'willing to assume an open and vulnerable position', with regards knowledge giving (Klijn et al, 2010:195).

3.8.2 Validity, trustworthiness and credibility

Trustworthiness and authenticity on the part of the researcher contributes to the study's validity and credibility, and is important in discussing the soundness of the outcomes considering the questions posed, and methods used (Higgs, 2001; Holloway and Todres, 2003). Scholars have put forward various definitions and interpretations of what counts as 'validity'. Guba and Lincoln (1994:114) argue that within a constructivist paradigm, the positivist criteria of internal and external validity are replaced by the terms

'trustworthiness' and 'authenticity'. Within the dimension of trustworthiness, in addition to credibility, Guba and Lincoln claim that a study would be assessed on its qualities of transferability, dependability and confirmability. Angen (2000:392) recommends the term 'validation', rather than 'validity', as this suggests:

'A subjective, human estimation of what it means to have done something well, having made an effort that is worthy of trust and written up convincingly' (Angen, 2000:392).

Rather than assuming a tangible reality within the research, critical researchers deem research to be credible only when the constructions are acceptable to those who constructed them, although the researcher may take a different view (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1994). Hammersley (1995), redefining validity as 'confidence', suggests that interpretive studies should be evaluated on plausibility, relevance, and importance of the topic. Silverman (1993) saw reliability being based on the use of standardized methods for making field notes, transcribing interviews, and having peers review the data analysis.

I argue that this study has met the criteria for validity and credibility, in the various ways it has been defined. In Chapter 1, I set out my motivation for conducting the research, and how that influenced my theoretical and methodological frameworks. I have shown that the study is valid, credible, trustworthy, and authentic, and would inspire confidence by its plausibility and relevance to the field. I have done this in several ways. First, the Literature Review (Chapter 2) has shown the importance of examining the concepts central to this research, amid the concerns expressed by other researchers (e.g., Hammersley, 1995). Second, through using open-ended interviews, I was prioritising participants' experiences and views over my own, although was not reluctant to add to the debate where I felt that would aid the thinking. I was open and transparent about the aim of the research, and the use of the data (e.g., Angen, 2000; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Third, this study's data is comprehensive in the number and range of interviewees: 23 interviews were conducted with 54 individuals. I included a wide range of voices, representing different roles and levels of power and control within the MAT, from CEO to parents. Most people participated voluntarily: on only one occasion did a participant express initial reluctance to involvement. Fourth, I have been scrupulous in my transcribing of data from interviews, and in making notes of these encounters in my

research journal (Silverman, 1993). Fifth, through re-visiting two of the research sites, I have been able to ask respondents to reflect on their accounts of their original positioning and experiences, and to both amend and add to those accounts, including in the light of any newer developments in their context (e.g., Kincheloe and McLaren, 1994). Finally, I have assessed my approach to theorising and analysis on the initial data findings, through peer-review events (Silverman, 1993). Through doctoral supervision meetings, and various contributions to seminars, conferences, and symposia, I have taken advantage of critical scholarly experience. For example, MMU (2016 – present), BERA (annual conferences September 2017, September 2018, September 2021), BELMAS (RIGs and conferences in 2017, 2018, 2019), NERA (annual conference 2018).

The validity or trustworthiness of the study is also reflected in its intended audiences, the type of knowledge-production that was intended and the socio-cultural and historical contexts in which it was undertaken (Holloway and Todres, 2003). There are various audiences who should find this research useful. First, education policy-makers at both a national and local level: those with responsibility for determining the future trajectory of academisation and the role of multi-academy trusts; and those with overall responsibility within a MAT, such as CEOs and trustees, for interpreting and enacting national policy in their local contexts. Second, there will be those affected by local policy enactment, whilst not having a voice within policy discourse, such as local governors, non-managerial school staff, and parents. A third audience would be those who are committed to working for a socially-just education system (Gunter et al, 2014). This includes those involved in university teacher education and school leadership research, who can work with colleagues in schools in a trusting partnership to challenge dominant, neo-liberal narratives endangering public forms of education and scrutiny (e.g., Hammersley-Fletcher et al, 2018; Schostak et al, 2020).

The knowledge produced in this study is the researcher's interpretation of first-hand experiences of a wide range of individuals involved in a MAT. As such, it presents these people's practical experiences of the concepts of governance, accountability, autonomy and agency, and the impact on the MAT's legitimacy, which should be of interest to all those who wish to hear different perspectives of a shared experience, in order to support the effective working of the MAT, or to make informed challenges. As Colebatch (2014)

found, whilst stakeholders may be drawing on shared understandings, they may make sense of the issues in different ways. A reader of this research will be aware that the experiences gathered are socio-culturally situated, vary from site to site, and are embedded within locally-specific structures and systems (e.g., Braun et al, 2011). However, they will note, too, that the overarching national context is one of education policy moving away from locally-elected oversight towards appointed bodies, with the declared aim of providing improved, bespoke support for the children in their schools. Having shown how this study meets the criteria for credibility and validity, I now appraise my methodological approach.

3.9 Evaluation of Research Methodology

In section 3.4, I justified setting the study within a constructivist, interpretative paradigm, drawing on both phenomenology and critical social policy enactment theory. An alternative approach would have been a case-study. The aims of the study were understanding the personal experiences of a range of individuals within the MAT system, in relation to governance, accountability, legitimacy, autonomy and agency. As such, the chosen MATs were sites in which to explore these concepts and impact of related policy enactment, rather than study in depth the contextual factors and related activities of each MAT. The use of policy enactment theory has enabled the interpretations of participants' experiences to be framed and understood within the local context, especially in relation to the MAT's stage in their journey, and the motivations and aspirations of their CEOs and trustees. The focus of the study, with the prime source of data on first-hand experiences of people involved in MATs, led me to use individual and group interviews, with a semi-structured/open-ended approach. Whilst group interviews presented a valuable opportunity for members to co-create experiences and reflections, challenge and check against each other, one of its limitations was the likely power dynamic between senior and junior members of staff, which potentially resulted in a reluctance of junior staff to speak out. Where participants all had the same role, or were all at the same level of seniority, as was the case for most group interviews, an even power dynamic was more likely, as well as a mutual understanding (if not necessarily shared interpretation) of the issues under discussion. My role as researcher was crucial, therefore, in supporting the group where some participants were reluctant to contribute,

in the form of group management and keen observation skills, as noted by Fontana and Frey (1994) and Bogdan and Biklen (2006).

I have used Guba and Lincoln's concepts of trustworthiness and authenticity to give the study credibility and validity. A further measure of a study's validity and trustworthiness is its triangulation of data (Lincoln and Denzin, 1994). Whilst a positivist conception of triangulation remains prominent in social science research (e.g., Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), alternative approaches to understanding and using triangulation, more suitable for interpretivist and constructivist research have been offered. Acknowledging that constructivists and interpretivists do not recognise an objective truth beyond the construction or experience, Mathison (1988:13) contends that 'triangulation results in convergent, inconsistent, and contradictory evidence that must be rendered sensible by the researcher'. In this sense, the multiple voices and constructions within this study, where a range of participants offered their experiences and interpretations of the same event, constituted a form of triangulation. The use of documentation and my research journal, also contributed to a greater understanding and checking of the data.

My constructions of these experiences were shared with two of the research sites for Phase 2 of the data collection, and participant reaction to these became part of the data. The follow-up data would have been more robust if I could have returned to all four sites, but because of timings and unavailability of participants, this was not possible. Despite this, the data that was collected in Phase 2 provided an illuminating account of how experiences of governance, accountability, autonomy and agency had progressed, altered or been affected by intervening events, and allowed participants to reflect on what they had said and experienced during Phase 1 of the research. As such, Phase 2 data was a valuable contribution to understanding the concepts under investigation.

In a similar way, it was unfortunate that I was not able to secure more interviews at Heron Trust and Pastures New. I have already referred to the busy schedule of the CEO at Heron Trust, which resulted in only senior leaders and himself being involved. It was also the case that this CEO retired before Phase 2 interviews could be secured. Likewise, at Pastures New, whilst seven participants were interviewed, there were roles not represented, such as parents or academy leaders. Whilst I could have pushed for more interviews, I had to recognise these CEOs' priorities, and so decided to focus on the rich

data already gathered from these sites, and the contribution they made to my large data corpus.

There could be criticism over the absence of member-checking, the process of returning analyses or transcripts to participants for the confirmation of accuracy. Ideally, I would have asked each participant to approve or comment on the transcribed interview, but time constraints and complex group structures prevented this. There were times where I conducted multiple interviews in one day, with one occasion producing over eight hours of interviewing over seven interviews with a total of 22 participants. Due to working full-time as a university lecturer, it took me several months to complete the transcription of these interviews, by which time I was conducting further interviews. I believed at the time that asking participants to comment on something they had said months before was not practical. It is worth noting that member-checking has been criticized for its reliance on the foundational assumption of a fixed truth or reality against which the interpretation can be measured (Angen, 2000; Sandelowski, 1993). Angen (2000) suggests a number of reasons why this process may lead to confusion, rather than clarification and endorsement: participants may have changed their mind in the intervening time; involvement in the interview process may have made an impact on their original assessment, resulting in a new, reflective interpretation of what they first said; new experiences may have intervened; participants may disagree with the researcher's interpretation, causing a question over whose interpretation is 'valid'. Angen (2000:383), arguing from an interpretivist stance, that there is no fixed universal reality, and that understanding is co-created through dialogue and experience, concludes that there can be 'no static truth to which the results of an interview can be compared'.

Finally, I must consider what assumptions I brought to the study, and consequently, my data analysis. Given my stated positionality, and interest in the topics under examination, there was always the possibility that I felt I knew what was going on without always listening intently or allowing the data to 'speak to me' on its own terms. Such assumptions and pre-conceptions are liable to result in some data being missed, whilst my gaze was elsewhere. This was the danger that van Manen (1990; 2014) warned about, resulting in his advocacy of 'bracketing out' or 'epoche' of the researcher, in order to

exclude their own experiences and thoughts from the inquiry. Keeping a research diary, and constant scrutiny of interview transcripts helped to mitigate this.

3.10 Summary of Chapter 3

In this chapter, I have shown the coherence between the various components of the study: the aims of the research and research questions; the theoretical framework underpinning the research; the qualitative methods used for conducting the research, and the thematic analytical framework. I have shown how, through the framing of interpretive phenomenology, personal experiences of individuals within a MAT could be gathered and explored for their richness and depth of nuance, which is necessary in order to understand the essence of the research questions posed. Through the use of policy enactment theory, I have highlighted the importance of the researcher attending to the positioning of individuals, as either policy actors or policy subjects, and viewing 'policy as discourse', in order to understand the implications of the changing power dynamics and relationships, and the authority of 'voice'. I have demonstrated the appropriateness of using qualitative interviews and shown the wide range of stakeholders involved in the study. I have shown how my chosen thematic analytical approach for data analysis was consistent with a constructivist-interpretive phenomenological approach, and I have stated my position on research integrity and ethics. I concluded by critiquing my chosen methodological approach, acknowledging its limitations, and considering alternative strategies.

Next, Chapter 4 will present the study's findings.

CHAPTER 4: DATA PRESENTATION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the data from the research, which are implicit to the three research questions for the study:

RQ1: What does governance and accountability mean to those involved in MATs, and what are the practical implications for individuals?

RQ2: What are the implications for those in positions of local leadership and local governance, in terms of autonomy and agency? and

RQ3: What does legitimacy look like for MATs?

The nature of these questions has meant that, whilst certain sections in this chapter are overtly devoted to a particular research question, there is overlap in the presentation of data, just as there was overlap in the discussion of these themes with participants during the interviews. As detailed in Chapter 3, the interpretative phenomenological framing of the research enabled participants to talk about their experiences of the themes under discussion in a way which suited them, and whilst an interview schedule was used, there was an inter-weaving of themes, issues and concerns in the dialogue. For group interviews in particular, participants could build on previous comments, question or contradict each other; where the interviewer thought it appropriate, this method of ‘to-ing and fro-ing’ was not discouraged. Presented here is the data grouped into themes that emerged as being most relevant to the research questions. Chapters 5-7 will examine and analyse the data in more detail, against the literature presented in Chapter 2.

With the caveats expressed above, Section 4.2 presents data related to RQ1. It looks at the systems and lines of accountability chosen by the MATs, and of participants’ understandings and interpretations of these. It presents findings on the transparency and clarity of these structures for those involved in the MAT, including an understanding of changes in roles and responsibilities, and the new centres of power, and also of the sometimes-opaque mechanisms for appointing MAT members and trustees. It concludes with the experiences of non-managerial staff in relation to their understanding of the new structures, and how these very substantial changes in the governance system of their

workplace structures have been communicated. Data presented in Sections 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5 are also intrinsically related to RQ1, as the structures of governance and lines of accountability underpin how the MAT operates, affecting the impact on individuals in terms of autonomy and agency, and how the organisation can lay claims to legitimacy.

In Section 4.3, data is presented particularly related to RQ2. It looks at the marginalisation of the local voice in governance, and the implications for local governors in terms of their autonomy and agency in their role. Within this, there are several sub-themes: the reduction in local democratic representation; the perceived deficit of local knowledge amongst those who govern, and certain moves to address this; how local governors have dealt with reduced autonomy and power; expectations of accountability amongst local governors; and finally, the situation where governors were finding themselves in a hybrid place of being held to account by the MAT, yet without holding power and control themselves.

Section 4.4 also presents data related to RQ2, but for academy staff, and their relationship with the MAT. The focus is, within the new governance and accountability structures, the importance of building relationships and developing trust, and on balancing central control and professional autonomy. Data is presented on the system-wide building of relationships between the MAT and its joining schools, and the sensitivities needed in negotiations around agency and autonomy. It includes data on the perceived benefits and drawbacks of being part of a centralised governance and management system for staff in leadership positions. Finally, data is presented on the concept of 'earned autonomy' and its implications for academy leaders.

In Section 4.5, data is presented in relation to RQ3, with two dominant themes. First, how authority is legitimised through appropriate knowledge and expertise within the trust board, the CEO and his/her MAT team, and very senior leaders. Second, this section presents data in relation to how the MAT is legitimised through its underpinning values and ethos. It presents the tension between an observed alignment with either education or business values, and the concerns over the impact of becoming a MAT on the founding school's values, reputation and capacity to be effective as a provider of education. Section 4.5 also refers to RQ1 and 2, as the MATs were being judged in their capacity to be legitimate providers of education in relation to their governance and accountability

systems, and new leaders were being judged on their legitimate wielding of power by those with reduced autonomy.

All names of individuals and institutions used in this chapter are pseudonyms. Not all participants are assigned pseudonyms: where they have, this is to help with the clarity of the discussion. All quotes are from Phase 1 of the research, unless otherwise indicated.

4.2 Systems and lines of governance and accountability

This section presents data related to RQ1. With a structure independent from the Local Authority (LA), the new systems of governance and accountability adopted by these MATs brought many changes in positions of power and responsibility. Section 4.2.1 presents data in relation to the governance structures and roles of responsibilities in each of these MATs, including participants' interpretations of these. Section 4.2.2 presents data regarding the transparency and clarity over these new structures, the perception of who holds power, and the communication of changes.

4.2.1 The MATs' governance structures and roles of responsibility

The structure of these MATs was similar: each was headed by a board of Members, who oversaw the whole MAT and had ultimate accountability, and answerable to them, was the trust board, the main seat of governance (see Figure 4.1, below, and Figures 3.1– 3.4 in Chapter 3 for individual MAT structures). The trust board comprised the CEO, between seven and nine unpaid volunteer trustees (sometimes termed directors), including a trust chair, and sometimes paid MAT staff in the role of executive directors. In some of the MATs, the paid MAT staff had over-arching roles and responsibilities across the MAT but were not part of the trust board. In Hazeldene and Heron MATs, individual academies had retained their local governing bodies (LGBs), whilst Chalkdown and Pastures New had re-named this layer of governance 'local advisory board' (LAB) with governors now being termed 'local advocates'. At Chalkdown, LGBs of individual neighbouring primary academies had been replaced by an over-arching LAB.

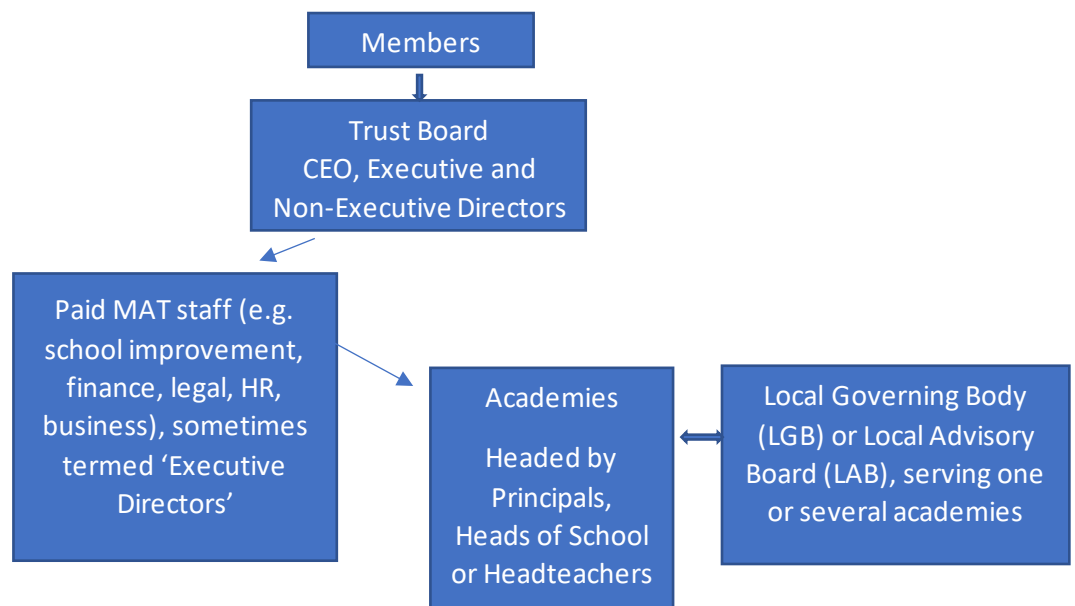


Figure 4.1: Generic structure of the MATs

The terminology of school leaders varied across the four MATs. In some, the term ‘Executive Principal’ referred to a head of several schools, as in the Tollston primaries in Chalkdown and the Heron trust primaries. It also referred to the head of Chalkdown’s large secondary school in Tollston, Hill Top Secondary. Headteachers of individual primary schools were variously termed ‘Principal’ (Heron Trust), ‘Head-of-School’ (Chalkdown and Hazeldene), or ‘headteacher’ (Pastures New). To a certain extent, choice of title reflected the degree of responsibility and accountability attributed to the roles, which is discussed in Section 4.4.

Responsibility for running the business of the MAT was variously said to be the trustees’ or the paid MAT staff’s. At Hazeldene, the trust chair believed it to be the Board’s responsibility:

‘I’ve now an understanding that, as trustees, we are managing a business (Trust Chair, Hazeldene).

Whereas at Chalkdown, the ‘expert’ paid MAT staff were seen to be doing the day-to-day running of the business, with trustees taking overall responsibility:

'You've got your experts who are involved in the running of the day-to-day business [paid MAT staff], then you've got us [trustees]' (trustee, Chalkdown).

These differences to some extent, reflected the size and age of the MAT: the more established MATs had a bigger and more influential paid MAT staff team; the newer ones were still finding their feet. Where MATs had created specific 'business' roles, some of these individuals were also appointed as executive trustees, particularly if they held a key, senior position. Chalkdown had eight members of staff in addition to the CEO, with responsibilities for finance, legal, HR and payroll issues, and also, a 'Director' and 'Deputy' of 'Operations'. The role of this team was to *'make sure the structure that you have in place is purposeful for what you're trying to do'* (CEO, Chalkdown). Here, school improvement across the MAT was provided by a team of individuals with backgrounds in education and teaching, and a small team of external education consultants. Hazeldene had appointed a Director of Business, who, together with the CEO, did the day-to-day running of the MAT. During Phase 1, Hazeldene had no other MAT staff, but the CEO envisaged members of the Senior Leadership Team (re-named 'Directors'), having an over-arching school improvement role across the MAT. In Phase 1, Pastures New had no paid Trust officers, but employed an external independent consultant to focus on quality assurance and governance across the MAT. The CEO highlighted the difference between an informal partnership with schools where he offered school-to-school support, and the legally-binding terms necessitated by being part of a MAT: *'the only difference is that the Trust [is] a legal partnership'* (CEO, Pastures New).

In setting up the new team of personnel running and governing the MAT, both executive (paid staff) and non-executive (voluntary trustees/members), there was a sense of excitement amongst the CEOs – *'new blood, people we do not know'*, [acting as a] *'sounding board'* (CEO, Chalkdown) for new ideas. However, both this CEO and her board were aware of its 'tempering role' for any over-ambitious ideas, despite her clear education expertise. One trustee framed his role in terms of practical, business management, adopting a cautioning tone, whilst admitting that it was the CEO who presented the visionary ideas:

'She is the CEO, she is the expert in the education field. She will say she wants to go off and do this, and that ... But we might [ask] "Why? Have we got the capacity in the MAT to resource that project?"' (trustee, Chalkdown).

Yet the view that the trustees held real power was contested by the ex-sponsor of Chalkdown (Richard), who was no longer part of the MAT, and had no dealings with them. With very limited knowledge of their academies or indeed education, Richard believed that trustees would not be able to confront or challenge their CEO if there was serious disagreement, and that their motive to be involved in the trust was related to reputation and status, rather than a desire to improve education:

*'The trust exercises no power whatsoever. What's going to happen if a trust falls out with the CEO of a multi-academy trust or the sponsor? [...] They're not paid. A lot of them do it because of status: "I'm trustee of this very successful MAT, and we have 96 schools, and it's all wonderful", and then you ask them about the detail, and they know **nothing** about it'* (Richard, ex-sponsor, Chalkdown).

Richard believed it was the CEOs and their team, rather than trustees, who were *'driving the vision'*, and that the view of trustees having a *'tempering'* role was disingenuous. Richard's previous experience as a trustee for a failed MAT, where trustees were excluded from meetings led him to conclude that *'the individual in charge makes all the decisions'*, with the trust board exercising no power. One of his key criticisms of the MAT model was that when a non-educationalist was in charge, they were more likely to appoint *'their mates'* to the trust board, who had little knowledge of their academies, and with no commitment to attending meetings. He described this system as *'a very dark world, behind closed doors, and not very accountable'*. Richard conceded that his own sponsorship prior to Chalkdown taking over was based on a *'primitive model'*, and that it was possible that Chalkdown would be more successful in terms of student results and school improvement, although he did wonder *'do you have to be in a MAT to do that?'*. The theme identified by Richard of the expertise of the CEO is reflected in data to support RQ3, on the legitimacy of the MAT, examined in Section 4.5.

4.2.2 Transparency and clarity over the new governance and accountability structures

This section focuses on the transparency of changes in governance, roles and responsibilities, including the appointment of trustees and members to the trust board, and how clearly these changes and processes were communicated to participants.

4.2.2.1 Perceptions and understandings of who holds over-arching power in the MAT

The new layer of governance in MATs, the trust board, had resulted in the appointment of individuals to positions of high responsibility, but with not necessarily a clear role or job description, other than the Code of Conduct for governors (NGA, 2022), updated to cover MATs since the beginning of the study, and the Commission guidance (Charity Excellence Framework, 2016-2019). In each MAT, the CEO was an executive member of the trust board, and each had been headteacher of the founding academy. This sometimes resulted in a blurring of roles and a further lack of clarity over who had ultimate responsibility of the MAT: the members, the CEO, the trust chair, or the trust board as a collective body. This was sometimes compounded by a reluctance amongst CEOs to relinquish their authority and duties as headteacher:

‘Most people would say I’m the CEO, but in reality, I’ve been a head teacher for 25 years, and I don’t really want that to change’ (Ben, CEO, Pastures New).

How far Ben would be able to maintain a hands-on role as the trust expanded, was debatable. Staff development was clearly where his passion lay, yet the role of CEO demanded expertise in business and finance, with much time being taken up with the structural organisation of the MAT. He admitted that he was now *‘responsible for everything’*, including the outcomes of each of his schools, and was accountable to the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC).

As explained in paragraph 4.2.1, and shown in Figure 4.1, it was the ‘members’ who headed the whole MAT. This role was variously described as *‘the share holders’* (trustee, Hazeldene; CEO, Chalkdown), or *‘custodians’* (CEO, Hazeldene), whose main responsibility was to appoint trustees. However, there was evidence of confusion over the distinction between the roles of member and trustee. For example, during the interview with the trust chair at Hazeldene, she was trying to clarify her own understanding of the difference between the two roles. Being a new MAT, she claimed, had meant learning a lot in a short

time, and with very little guidance from the DfE, because *‘the difficulty is that there is nothing out there that says “this is what you have to do”*, (Trust Chair, Hazeldene). A little embarrassedly, she was also aware that members themselves were unclear of their remit:

‘I keep getting asked [by members] “what is the role of the member?...what should we be doing?”’ (Trust Chair, Hazeldene).

Through governance training, and access to online materials, most trustees had begun to feel more confident about these roles, and understood the structure of governance in business terms:

[The members] hold us to account on behalf of the Government, the tax-payer - that we are managing the business in an effective and appropriate way’ (Trust Chair, Hazeldene).

Typically, members were local people who were *‘philanthropic, [and] have knowledge’* (CEO, Hazeldene) and who may have been former governors of the original academy,

‘who have grown with us, ... linked to the values, to the community, ethos... but don’t necessarily have the skill-set to become a trustee’ (CEO Chalkdown).

For Pastures New, as a Church of England (CofE) MAT, members had to include figures from the local church and diocese. The majority of members in all of the MATs did not have an education background; and in all cases except Pastures New, members did not appear to have very much involvement with how the trust board operated. They were, however, expected to meet with the rest of the trust board for the annual general meeting (AGM), and to ‘interrogate’ the trustees. As shown above, the MATs were clearly taking their model of management and governance from business structures, and this seemed to help trustees to understand the different roles and functions of the Board:

‘The trust board calls the AGM, they run it and invite the members to it [...] in the same way that a business would – they invite the shareholders in, but [trustees] set the agenda. [It] gives the members the opportunity to interrogate us, and raise any issues that they are concerned about, and maybe if there is something they are

concerned about, they can direct us to take action in a certain area' (Trust Chair, Hazeldene).

However, given the ex-sponsor's (Richard) scepticism over the power and knowledge of members and the trust board, there is a question around with what authority the members could 'interrogate' trustees, and 'direct them to take action', with their predominantly non-education backgrounds and not having 'the skill-set to become a trustee'.

There were other interpretations on where the power-base lay. Interviews with trustees of the same MAT revealed different, and at times contradictory understandings of lines of accountability and responsibilities in the top level of MAT governance and management. The trust chair of Chalkdown (Paul), believed that accountability-wise, the '*buck stopped*' with him, not the CEO. As trust chair, Paul regarded himself, to be '*officially*' the CEO's '*line-manager*', being '*responsible for holding her to account, where necessary*', and setting her performance management targets. Another trustee (David) on the same board had a different view: he regarded the CEO as the accounting officer, and thus being '*accountable for the budgets, and making sure the money is used in accordance with the Financial Handbook*'. David seemed uncomfortable with the notion that the Chair 'line-managed' the CEO, and doubted if the CEO saw the professional relationship in such terms:

*'Would I class Paul as Sheila's line manager? Would **Sheila** class Paul as her line manager?! [...] I'm not convinced I would. I would consider Paul as being chair of the board, and therefore ultimately carrying forward the decisions of the board. I would say it's not necessarily a line manager role; it's more of an equal role'*
(David, trustee, Chalkdown).

This trustee viewed the two roles at the top as equal, and compared them to the corporate model, with a CEO and chairman. With this model, whilst the chairman could not overrule the CEO, that figure could take any concerns they had about the CEO to the board, which could then, as a body, rule against the CEO. These different views of the Chair's role indicated a possible point of tension, through misunderstandings of responsibilities. If it was generally accepted that the Chair was the voice of the Board, but

the Chair had aspirations and expectations beyond that, relationships amongst board members were likely to be adversely affected, with implications for effective governance. This lack of clarity over the central seat of power was reflected in participants' experiences of the lack of transparency over the appointment of members and trustees, and the corresponding responsibilities, discussed below.

4.2.2.2 Transparency and clarity in the responsibilities and appointment of members and trustees

One of the main responsibilities of members was to appoint trustees, yet this responsibility appeared to be in name only, and possibly reflected where the expertise was in fact acknowledged to lie – within the CEO and executive MAT staff:

'All the recommendations [for appointing trustees] really are made by the Executive Team - myself, and the Director of Operations who's responsible for governance' (CEO, Chalkdown).

Data showed that trustees had typically been known to the CEO, either through a personal relationship, or recommendation from a third party: after an informal 'interview' with the CEO and possibly other Board members, the CEO would recommend their appointment to the members. There was evidence of governors from the original academy prior to MAT conversion, moving into the role of trustee with no formal selection and appointment process. At Hazeldene, one trustee was both Chair of the LGB and Vice-Chair of the Trust Board, an arrangement acknowledged not to be ideal:

'There was a nudge-nudge wink-wink that I would become Vice-Chair if [x] moves up [to Trust Chair]' (Trust Vice-Chair, and Chair of LGB).

This mixing of roles was also evident at the other two smaller trusts. At Heron Trust, three governors from the original school which set up the MAT had become trustees, along with the Chairs of LGBs from each of the three schools which formed the MAT, although they had subsequently relinquished their local governor role to be on the trust board. The CEO at Heron Trust admitted that *'it does need an external voice somewhere'*, and that the RSC was not happy with a situation where most or all of the trustees have been former local governors of its academies. At Pastures New, where I interviewed members and trustees together, they did not see a clear distinction in their roles, and indeed there

seemed to be a degree of cross-over. Several had also been governors at the founding academy, and each had been asked to join the trust board by the CEO: *'I felt as though I slid into it'*, was how one trustee at Pastures New described his move from governor to trustee. There was an admission that this may not have been best practice, and also the suggestion that the CEO was gathering together a group of trusted people he had known for several years, with the best skills and expertise for the role:

'You won't be surprised to know that Ben [CEO] asked me, which is a common thread, isn't it? Because he's a hunter-gatherer' (Trust Board Chair, Pastures New).

Use of terms such as 'a hunter-gatherer' suggested a familiarity with the CEO which raised questions about the trust board's ability and willingness to effectively scrutinise and challenge the decisions and actions made by him. As a new MAT, the trustees and members at this MAT were acutely aware that this over-lapping of roles was not entirely satisfactory, and they were at pains to explain that their newly-formed constitution addressed this. In recognition of the pitfalls of the merging of roles and responsibilities, the CEO at Chalkdown had moved away from internal appointments of trustees. Given this lack of clarity at top governance level over roles and responsibilities, it was perhaps not surprising that confusion was also identified amongst members of staff, especially at non-leadership level, discussed below.

4.2.2.3 Communicating changes in governance to non-leadership staff

Some staff in non-management positions, perhaps with less involvement in the initiation and growth of the MAT, suggested a lack of knowledge and communication about the changes in governance:

'No, I must admit I don't really understand [...] what is what' (teacher, Hazeldene).

Whilst some staff, including the teacher above, accepted this situation for the present, they would be concerned if omitted from discussions around any important changes which would directly affect them: *'If we saw loads of changes, and it was affecting our roles'* (teacher, Hazeldene). Support staff at this MAT conveyed a sense of feeling left out of discussions and decisions, which they saw taking place at a higher level, but without information filtering down to them. They did not know who the trustees and new trust or

LGB chairs were, nor the distinction between the two layers of governance: in their words, they didn't *'have a clue'* of the role of the trust board, although they conceded they may have been told at some point, but *'because they are not part of our lives'*, they had not remembered. These participants would have appreciated better communication about the changes to governance, including an opportunity to ask questions, especially where changes had an impact on them:

'A brief overlay of, "why we're here and what we do"' [...] on things that impact us'
(support staff, Hazeldene);

and being kept informed of the addition of a new school to the MAT, which would affect their own roles and duties:

'There's been no update... keeping us in the loop is all people expect' (support staff, Hazeldene).

Possibly in an understanding of the pace of change, these staff members said they would have been just as happy with intranet communications as a face-to-face staff meeting, but the overall message was that communication of changes had been lacking, a situation not experienced before the MAT's inception.

4.2.3 Summary of Section 4.2

This section has presented research findings with specific reference to RQ1 *'What does governance and accountability mean to those involved in MATs, and what are the practical implications for individuals?'*. The centralised model of governance meant that each MAT had a board of members who were the official overseers of the organisation, and the trust board were accountable to them. However, trustees, rather than members, were acknowledged as holding the real power of governance, and as such, the type of individuals selected for these roles, along with their expertise, were crucial; and whilst it was the members who technically appointed the trustees, the data showed that in reality, this was in the hands of the CEO and his/her MAT staff.

The blurring of roles between members, trustees and even governors, and the widespread lack of education background amongst those at the highest tier of governance - members, raised an issue about accountability in governance. The members had a duty to hold the trustees to account, yet without an in-depth knowledge of how the

board worked, or about education more generally, this may have posed some problems. A lack of clarity was sometimes evident amongst members and trustees understanding the difference between their roles. The member-trustee confusion was particularly apparent in the newest MATs, where some members and trustees had been former governors of the founding academy, and now worked closely together as one team, as they had a shared understanding of that school and the CEO, as former headteacher. This could have been an indication of the need to put people into place quickly at the MAT's inception, rather than anything more deliberate. Even so, this lack of transparency in member and particularly trustee appointments, where individuals known to the CEO just *'slid into'* the role, with a *'nudge-nudge wink-wink'* raises questions over the make-up of the governance of the MAT in terms of its legitimacy, in particular the plurality of the trust board. This is a theme central to RQ3, examined in Section 4.5. One further issue of concern for non-managerial staff was the lack of communication about the new governance structures, and who was now in charge of their MAT, and subsequently, their academy. This started to point to not feeling valued, and a change in the level of professional agency: themes implicit to RQ2. The following section will examine the findings in relation to the marginalisation of local agency in governance.

4.3 Marginalisation of the local voice in governance: implications for autonomy and agency

This section presents data related to RQ2: how the new governance and accountability systems, documented above, have had an impact on local governance, in particular, any changes to the autonomy and agency of the LGB and individual governors. Section 4.3.1 presents data on the reduction in local democratic representation. Section 4.3.2 looks at a perceived deficit in local knowledge, and steps taken to address this. Section 4.3.3 explores the MATs' expectations of local governors, and how governors have dealt with their reduced levels of autonomy. Finally, Section 4.3.4 reflects the tension of governors who were being held to account but with greatly reduced powers of control.

4.3.1 Reduction in local democratic representation

Within the maintained school system, the LA is represented on LGBs. However, within the MAT system, there is no requirement for a local councillor to be on the trust board, and they appeared to be discouraged from joining the LGBs. Interviews with local governors

at Hill Top Academy, Chalkdown, identified two reasons for this: first, MATs saw the LA as being an unwelcome and largely irrelevant interference:

'The powers-that-be don't want councillors on because they want to run the show in their way which is not the way of the LA [...]' (local governor, Chalkdown).

Second, local councillors themselves had self-withdrawn, as they were aware that the newly-formed LGBs/LABs no longer had the professional and personal kudos they once had, with the LA being side-lined in the Academies Programme. Within a MAT model, local governors have fewer accountability and responsibility powers, and the links with the local community could be lessened if the MAT was based outside of their borough, both of which could have an impact on their professional identity and standing in the community, as suggested by one governor:

'Because the sponsors are out of the borough, a lot of [LA ex-governors] aren't that interested on being on the LGB, because they can't get much out of it' (local governor, Chalkdown).

There was a concern that this had had an impact on the make-up of the current LAB at Hill Top Secondary Academy, with regards to interest and expertise in education, when this same governor went on to explain why some governors had left:

'There were a lot of movers and shakers in the borough, who were on [the LGB], who were in the field of education and social policy [...]. But they've all disappeared now, and I think it is because there isn't such a stake' (local governor, Chalkdown).

A community governor, who was also a parent, expressed similar concern over the diminished powers and status of local governors, which had resulted in less involvement of elected councillors:

'I think that's why we had two senior governors who left, who were South-Asian. [One, who] lives in the community, same as me, works for the LA and he said "if we don't have any powers, then I don't want to be in a position where I'm a councillor and I don't have any powers"' (community governor/parent, Chalkdown).

Given that Hill Top Academy had large Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupil populations, this governor (who was of Asian heritage) was raising veiled concerns over the ethnic and community representation of the LAB. Since being part of Chalkdown, it had become predominantly White-British, with *'only three of us that live locally'*, a situation confirmed by his fellow- (White British) governors in a different interview: *'we are basically White-British as a board [LAB]'*, and *'we've become less representative [of our local community]* (both local governors, Chalkdown). Together with the physical distance of the central MAT to its academies, this situation prompted one governor to reflect on the MAT's empathy and understanding with the local communities:

'[The MAT] don't understand the complex background of working-class communities from different racial backgrounds' (community governor/parent, Chalkdown).

The absence of locally-elected councillors, however, was not always seen negatively. An LGB/LAB comprising local figures with a background in education, and prepared to invest their time long-term, was a model put forward by the ex-sponsor of Chalkdown, which he saw as more democratic than either the LGB or MAT model, neither of which guaranteed educational expertise in the seats of governance:

'I don't think elected politicians in practice bring democracy [...] you need some structures in education [...] on a local level, so that you've got people who understand the business, people who understand the industry, sit on that board for the long-term [...] which have a degree of accountability, [...] you'd need to be clear about the quality of the people that went on it' (Richard, ex-sponsor, Chalkdown).

The CEOs in these MATs would likely argue that the trust board performed this role, with the LGB/LAB providing the local input and knowledge. However, as the data shows, the lack of local figures and in some cases lack of education expertise on the trust and members boards, coupled with the reduction in local participation and accountability, puts in doubt whether the model reflects Richard's suggestions: this deficit in local knowledge is addressed below.

4.3.2 A deficit of local knowledge and moves to address this

The data identified concern amongst participants over the reduced size of the new trust boards, compared with the old LGBs, and how trustees could keep abreast of issues across several academies. There was also a worry that, because many of these trustees were new to the MAT, and some to the local area, there was a *'deficit of understanding [of] that lower level down'* (LGB Chair, Chalkdown), and that steps should be taken to ensure that trustees were well-informed about their academies, and what happened at classroom level:

'The Governing Body we had before was larger, full of people who were steeped in the school, the ethos [...] What we've now got is people who have to do a lot of running to catch up on the ethos of the school. And [...] there is a clear division between most of [the Trust Board] and what's left of the LGB' (Trust Vice-Chair/Chair of LGB, Hazeldene).

These comments revealed a sense of discomfiture of a system where not everyone knew the ways of the school; people who were not 'steeped' in the school, and so lacked the necessary knowledge and understanding. This participant implied that a certain empathy with the school was lacking, causing divisions between the two layers of governance. Trustees from other MATs admitted their own lack of local knowledge about a new school could be problematic:

'I've gathered information from the headteacher's report [...] but it's a bit of a weakness in my knowledge, [...] and it's something I need to improve on, I admit it' (trustee, Pastures New).

This remark was in the context of the Pastures New trustees being very familiar with both the founding school and its first acquisition, with trustees having a strong connection with at least one of these schools, as opposed to their new school where there was no representation of knowledge or connection on the trust board. However, the move away from large LGBs to much smaller trust boards was not always seen as adverse. LGBs could be seen as too big to function well with members being less committed:

'With a group that big [20], there's very little commitment, because there's so many people, and people drop in and drop out, as they wish' (CEO, Pastures New).

The implication here being that a smaller group of trustees would be more likely to engage, due to their absence being noted, and also with perhaps a clearer role of their contribution to the organisation than before.

Addressing concerns over trustees' lack of knowledge, Hazeldene and Chalkdown had put strategies in place to increase flow in communication between the trust board and individual academies. Hazeldene was considering setting up focus groups on the trust board, with each having an area of expertise (education and finance, for example), and would liaise with the LGBs. Chalkdown had assigned a 'link trustee' to several academies, aiming to make the trustees more known to the school, at both staff and local governance level, attending some of the LAB meetings. However, there was the underlying suggestion that this mechanism could also be used as a tool for surveillance, as this participant hinted:

'Our job is to ensure that the LABs are doing everything correct- because we've spent a lot of time looking at the roles they should be doing' (Trust Chair, Chalkdown).

Here is the suggestion that trustees did not want their time invested in 'educating' the LABs wasted. From interviews with all participants, it was clear that members of the LGB/LAB had had little involvement in the discussion on their new roles, which could explain both the misunderstandings of the new roles and responsibilities, and in some cases, resentment. The less charitable interpretation of the purpose of these visits as being one of surveillance, where trustees monitored academy staff without appearing to, was likely to provoke tensions between governors and trustees if not addressed.

Chalkdown had included LAB members on the central Audit and Finance committee, ostensibly to increase local understanding of the MAT spending and budget, and also to have a range of views. However, in general, governors were not included in any trust board or MAT staff meetings: *'I have no contact with Chalkdown'* (local governor, Chalkdown). Whilst there was some attempt for local governors to learn new skills, the following comment from a trustee suggested that it was a way of making the LAB members *feel* included, given that their powers had been reduced, although he rebutted my suggestion that this was tokenism:

Trustee: *It's to try to keep in touch with some of the LABs, because they feel distant from it, and "you're taking control of all our budgets", and blah, blah blah. In a way it was to try to get people involved. [...] And it does give you another perspective...*

Interviewer: *Does it? So, it's not just tokenism?*

Trustee: *No. Obviously, they're going to be interested in their own academy, but equally, they're trying to upskill themselves, and come in and try and understand what's going on [...] it's about trying to get that breadth and variety of views in the governance (David, Trustee, Chalkdown).*

This view of governors wanting to 'upskill themselves' could suggest an attempt by governors to retain some of their previous power, in a new climate where hard skills were more valued over 'softer' qualities. In David's final comments, above, there was acknowledgement of the value of having a '*breadth and variety of views in the governance*' of the MAT, as well as a need for two-way communication and understanding. However, with the very clear reduction in LAB powers and accountability, there was a distinct lack of clarity over how such meaningful and true exchanges of views across the governance levels, would be enacted, in his MAT, at least.

In a similar move to Chalkdown, the Pastures New trust board was proposing that local governors be re-named 'advocates', as their role was perceived to be moving from governance to '*promoting the school*' (trustee, Pastures New). Although still under discussion at the time of Phase 1 interviews, there was acknowledgement by the trustees that a more strategic understanding of a governance and communication structure which would not '*lose track of local issues*' was important (Members Board Chair, Pastures New). They were considering having a lead advocate from a 'Good' or 'Outstanding' school on the trust board, although they were constrained by the current rules regarding maximum numbers of directors/trustees on both the Members and Directors' boards. In this system of governance, for communication and information-sharing to work well between the two levels, the Pastures New trust chair believed it would depend on the '*competence of the people*' (not defined) in the advocate role, and such individuals would be chosen by the CEO and trust board together. He only saw a problem if there were to be a difference in opinion on the appointment and role of advocates, between the trustees and the CEO; in such a case, he said that the board would then need to be

prepared to challenge the CEO. Given the data presented earlier in Section 4.2, it seems necessary to establish on what basis, and with what knowledge and expertise, such challenges could legitimately be made, a theme explored in Section 4.5.

4.3.3 Put up or shut up: dealing with reduced accountability

Each MAT had a Scheme of Delegation, which stated the delegated powers for the academies and their LGB/LAB. Better performing academies tended to have more delegated powers than poorer-performing ones (*'earned autonomy'*, the CEO of Chalkdown explained, and discussed fully in section 4.4.3). There was acknowledgement that in some cases, local governors/advocates were unhappy with their reduced accountability and responsibility, but Chalkdown's CEO was very clear that with responsibility came risk and liability, and that was at Trust level:

The governance is here [Trust Board]. That's where the responsibility lies, that's where the liability lies, that's where the risk lies. Really, [LABs] are just committees of [the Trust Board], and they do have delegated powers. Some of them don't [...], but these [certain academies] do have delegated powers, it just might not be what they want to do' (Sheila, CEO, Chalkdown).

The new relationship between the different layers of governance was regarded by Sheila as clear and 'complementary', rather than conflicting, with each individual bringing different skills and experiences to the level they were operating at. If governors were not happy with the new role, with fewer delegated powers, then they were free to leave, as was seen to be the case with LA governors (Section 4.3.1):

'If it's not what you want to do, it doesn't matter, we'd like you to be involved and retain you, but that's what the job is' (CEO, Chalkdown).

This shift in the seat of governance expertise and responsibility from local to central was reflected in the other MATs:

'The expertise to ask those questions about finance we've got at the Trust level, not at LGB level' (Director/SLT member, Hazeldene); and
[the advocates] are relieved of a lot of the onerous responsibilities [...] and they are freed up to promote the school' (trustee, Pastures New).

Such a change in local governing powers, being *'relieved of the onerous responsibilities'* and no longer having their expertise valued, had caused a sense of dissatisfaction amongst LGB/LAB members. Many of these local governors had been in post for some years and had made personal investment in supporting and improving the school, often through difficult circumstances: *'when you set out on a journey you want to see it through'* (local governor, Chalkdown, Phase 2). It was with a sense of regret and frustration that one local governor noted the dismantling of local committees, the LGB's lack of effective involvement with shaping curriculum policy, and the almost *'pseudo scrutiny'* they were expected to follow:

'Before, we had substantial time to focus on quality issues; this is now wrapped up as a 'catch-all', thrice a year at a full governors' meeting. There's not enough time to fully scrutinise from a quality perspective' (local governor, Chalkdown).

This governor wanted more time to consider and discuss the issues presented, in an informed and meaningful debate, where real challenges could be expressed, as was the case prior to being in the MAT. He was intimating that any questioning or challenge from governors was a rushed process, a paper exercise, which resulted in the system of governance at this level being less effective. This lack of being able to fully hold the school leader to account had cast the governors into the role of observers, argued one community governor:

'With the MAT, we have a say, but we're more or less observers. We can't hold the Headteacher to account, in terms of disciplinaries, or for the finance: we just observe the finance, we don't have a say' (Community governor/parent, Chalkdown).

With this reduction in meaningful local scrutiny, monitoring and accountability, the LABs and LGBs were moving to a role of advisor, rather than challenger to the principal/executive principal; or worse, *'observers'* of proceedings. Furthermore, they experienced being *'totally reliant on what the Principal gives us at the LAB meeting'* (community governor/parent, Chalkdown) rather than being able to independently hold the principal to account, and *'just have to accept [the MAT's] policies'* without discussion.

However, interviews with academy leaders gave quite a different perspective. At least one believed that in the LA-maintained system of governance, in-depth scrutiny of a head's performance could easily be averted, by governors only being presented with data a head wished them to see. Such a cover up would therefore question the ability of the LGB to hold a school leader to account, and could lead to problems for the school:

'They've only been told what you want them to know [...] And that's why you get governors saying "I never realised the school was in such a mess; you always told us things were fine"' (Executive Principal, Chalkdown Primaries).

When I asked this executive principal if she trusted the current trustees to be able to use their expertise and knowledge to hold her to account, she assented, although not utterly convincingly, with: *'I think so'*, possibly not wanting to appear disloyal to the MAT.

The re-framing of local governors as *'more or less observers'* was put to a senior officer in Tollston LA, who, although not part of the MAT, had been involved in the conversion of Hazeldene into an academy, and then a MAT. She saw this as an issue of the type of relationship that existed between a MAT and the LGB, and was concerned that an LGB might not be fulfilling its responsibilities under such conditions:

'If one or more governors [...] in a school where I was head, suggested that they were "mere observers"', I'd be needing to change something, because to me, that's about the relationship between the Trust and the LGB [...] in terms of responsibilities and accountabilities' (Senior LA Officer, Tollston).

This senior figure, saw local governors as maintaining their role of challenge and support within the academy system, regardless of the new layer of trust-level governance. Similarly, the executive principal of Hill Top Academy saw his LAB as *'a really powerful governing body with lots of potential [...] made up of credible people [with] a good reputation'*. The reality for many of the local governors, however, was far from these visions and interpretations. For example, the LAB Chair of Hill Top summed up the frustration and confusion that many governors felt about their reduced role, loss of agency in important policy areas, and marginalisation in local affairs:

‘I thought we were really important to be dealing with things at a local level, and we lost control of that. [...] I don’t have control of the finances, so I can’t say, “right we need to invest in this particular area”’ (LAB Chair, Chalkdown, Phase 2).

In response to this, the CEO of this MAT explained to me that *‘the fact that you want to make financial decisions, well I’m sorry, you’re just not [...] it’s not your remit’* (CEO, Chalkdown). There was clearly dissonance between the experiences of different individuals within the same organisation, depending on their role and perception of the changes to the structures of governance. The next section presents data on the anomaly of local governors being held accountable, yet having greatly reduced autonomous powers and agency.

4.3.4 In a hybrid place of accountability without holding power

With the increased blurring of governance and accountability between the trust board and its academies, which has been identified in this chapter, it was perhaps not a surprise that a lack of clarity was expressed over whose role it was to hold school leaders to account. This was especially the case when, as in Chalkdown’s Tollston primaries and at Heron Trust, there was an executive principal managing heads-of-schools or principals. Within the same MAT, there were sometimes different perceptions of school leader accountability. For example, at Chalkdown, the trust chair stated it was ‘the LAB’s job’ to hold the principal (or executive principal) to account, whilst heads-of-school (HoS) stated they were ‘answerable’ to the trust board, rather than to the local governors, with the MAT’s control rendering the LAB virtually redundant:

Interviewer: Do they [LAB/LGB] need to exist?

Head of School: I don’t think they do, no. But I think that very much depends on what MAT you’re in, and the level of governance you get from the MAT’ (HoS, Chalkdown).

Elsewhere, whilst the trust board was seen to hold school leaders to account, the LGB maintained a partial agentic role, and was in contrast to the view expressed above. At Hazeldene, despite it being clear that *‘the head is being managed by the [CEO]’*, it was regarded as good practice for the LGB Chair to be part of the team which *‘informs on the head’s performance’*, as they were much more likely to have had a working knowledge of

that head (both quotes from Hazeldene Trust Chair). This acknowledgement of the value of the LGB Chair's input was mirrored in comments by other academy leaders and staff, who welcomed their education expertise and local knowledge, which trustees could not necessarily provide:

'He's from an educational background, he gets it, he's lovely' (Principal, Heron Trust);

'[He brings] a different perspective to help us expand and develop' (teacher, Hazeldene)

Despite this more positive view of the LGB (Chair, at least), there was a common understanding that governance now operated at trust level, reducing the governor role to a *'a sideshow'* (governor, Chalkdown), but that not all governors realised this, and that academy leaders were almost kidding the governors into feeling they were needed, when in fact they were not:

*'The Chair of Governors has been a governor for a number of years, so she's treating it very much as she's always treated it, but actually, perhaps they haven't all got the awareness of...they're all diminished. The responsibility, the accountability is diminished...**hugely**'* (Executive Principal, Chalkdown Primaries).

As a result, *'a bit of a re-education'* (trust chair, Chalkdown) for local governors was needed. For academy-leaders, this 're-education', was seen to be particularly problematic, given the years it had sometimes taken to educate governors about their important role as challenger, in their ability to critique school data, and to present a cogent argument to Ofsted. Now, none of this was necessary, and governors were being asked to resume their role as *'community representative'* and *'visitor at public events'*:

'The role the MAT wants them to do is the role that we've always been trying to stop governors doing for years [...] the 'soft' stuff. As heads, we've spent years trying to make them understand their role as challenge [...] And what we're saying now is that they don't need to know about all that, because the MAT does [it]. What they really need to go back to is being that public figure ... representing the community' (Executive Principal, Chalkdown Primaries).

With this rather poignant observation, there was a danger that the lack of clarity over their place in the hierarchy, local governors were in a hybrid place of being held to account for local issues, but not having the powers to take control in areas linked to this accountability. This had implications for local governors' sense of agency and purpose, and how they interacted with the trustees:

'My perception is that governors have become less significant in terms of their role or their influence [...] I think it's very much a rubber stamp' (local governor, Chalkdown);

'We don't have that power now of authorisation' (community governor/parent, Chalkdown).

These experiences were affirmed by an HoS from the same MAT, reflecting on an LAB meeting, and the difference between her previous LGB under the state-maintained system, and the role of her local governors under the MAT system,:

'The governors here... it almost felt a little bit pointless [...] And you just felt like we were just giving them the information, and there was no actual leadership, or challenge, from the governors [...] my previous governors [...] were far more proactive, and governors were seen around the school, and you felt as though you were a bit more answerable to the governors, whereas here, you don't feel you are' (HoS, Chalkdown Primary).

One local governor thought that poor communication from the academy or MAT had caused parents to be under the misapprehension that local governors still had responsibility for the vision, for setting targets and budgets:

'They [parents] don't understand the powers that we've lost. They don't understand what we were and what we've become [...] it's not our vision, it's Chalkdown's vision [...] It all comes from the MAT' (community governor/parent, Chalkdown).

For local governors, including parents, who were aware of this reduced role, the disappointment was clear:

'I was a bit disappointed, because [a fellow-governor had] said, "you won't be doing things like finance", and I thought "oh, I like things like that, I find it really interesting"' (local governor, Hazeldene).

It was somewhat ironic, however, that, despite the local layer of governance being diminished, and the key strategic decisions being made at trust level, there was a feeling amongst some (typically parents) who may have aspired to local governing, that they would be unsuccessful, due to their social standing or lack of recognised professional skills:

'If I was going to apply to be a governor next year, I can't actually think of any skills [I have] [...] it would put me off, cos they say, "we want someone with HR experience", or "we're looking for someone with project management experience". I think it would exclude a lot of parents' (parent, Hazeldene).

When I raised with senior leaders these issues around the new two-tier model of governance, where local players no longer dealt with 'things at a higher level' there was the implication and expectation that, by the allegedly more qualified trust taking on the responsibility and accountability of the non-educational aspects, such as finance, HR and legal issues, it would 'free up' the lesser-qualified local governors to focus on teaching and learning. This executive principal tried to rationalise the reduction in local powers and shift in governor accountability:

*'These people are **volunteers**. [...] when you're on a governing body, the responsibility is massive, you're not paid, quite often you're not interviewed for these positions – what qualifies you to make these massive decisions? There are brilliant people on governing bodies, but actually, why are you there? [...] to make sure the children get the best deal' (Executive Principal, Chalkdown Primaries).*

This remark highlights one of the key contradictions and tensions identified in the study, in relation to governance of the MAT. Local governors were not seen to be qualified to be tasked with the responsibilities and accountabilities they had previously held; not able to make the 'massive decisions' because they lacked skills or expertise. As volunteers, neither were they paid to do so; yet unpaid, volunteer trustees, with limited or no educational expertise, were.

4.3.5 Summary of Section 4.3

This section has presented findings in relation to the impact of the new governance and accountability structures adopted by these MATs on the agency and autonomy of local governors, implicit to both RQ1 and RQ2, with the data showing how interconnected these two questions are. The data showed that the two-tier structure of governance which each of these MATs had adopted resulted in central decision-making at the trust board level, rather than devolved to the local governors. The change in status this brought to the local governors was typically reflected in their change of role to 'local advocates', and the Local Advisory Board, rather than LGB. Evidence was presented on the reduction of democratic representation in the form of LA governors, and in some cases, the withdrawal of local community figures who had a good knowledge and understanding of the school population and neighbourhood. This had contributed to a reduction of local knowledge of individual academies, a situation compounded by trustees being more distant (both geographically, and because of the centralised, slimmed-down system) than local governors/advocates, and so having to play 'catch-up' to understand the particular needs of academies.

As with the roles of trustees and members, a lack of clarity and transparency in the change of role and status to local governors was identified, especially amongst governors themselves, non-leadership academy staff, and parents, who would have valued being '*kept in the loop*' of communications. This confusion led to an uncertainty amongst some participants about the lines of accountability, especially responsibility for holding academy leaders to account. Despite this, the findings showed that trustees and senior leaders within the MAT were in agreement that the power of governance had shifted away from the LGB to the trust board, and that one of the points of tension was the lack of awareness amongst local governors of their new situation. Those who were aware, acknowledged that they had been reduced to the role of '*observer*', and '*advisor*' with a '*rubber-stamping*' role, rather than holding the headteacher to account. For several local governors in this study, there was a tangible feeling of regret at this reduction of influence and true quality control over issues which were pertinent to their local school, and the lack of democratically elected representatives from the community contributed to the feeling of being governed from a distance. Senior leaders recognised that the LGBs'

powers of scrutiny and accountability had been '*greatly diminished*', and even appeared to question the very existence of the LGB/LAB. Local governors were now framed as '*unpaid volunteers*', no longer seen to be qualified to be involved in '*making massive decisions*', which was now the role of the trust board, with their skills and expertise needed and valued to be in a position of high governance. However, trustees were also unpaid volunteers, but unlike some of the local governors, none had been through an election process, and a minority had educational expertise. This is an important point which is raised in the issues around the MATs' legitimacy, the focus of Section 4.5.

Section 4.4 will continue to present the data in relation to RQ1 and 2, but with a focus on how these governance and accountability changes have particularly affected academy staff, and the importance of relationship-building between the MAT and joining schools.

4.4 Balancing central control and professional autonomy: the importance of building relationships and developing trust.

This section presents data in relation to RQ2, with particular reference to the experiences of academy leaders and staff, regarding autonomy and agency, and highlights the role of developing respectful and trusting relationships between the MAT and its academy staff. Section 4.4.1 focuses on the system-wide building of relationships between the MAT and its joining schools, and the factors involved. Section 4.4.2 presents data in relation to how staff approached balancing the benefits of working within a new centralised system with the inevitable reduction in autonomy this brought for heads, in particular. Section 4.4.3 concludes with a presentation on the requirement from the MAT for school leaders to demonstrate responsibility with any autonomy bestowed, the terms and conditions attached to this, and what might lead to an increase in autonomy and agency.

4.4.1. 'Building a bridge': relationship-building between the MAT and joining schools

For the MAT, building a productive, working relationship with a joining school tended to be approached on a 'case-by-case' basis, depending on the school's situation. Sometimes this entailed sensitivity and negotiation, especially where staff had concerns about joining the MAT. For others, a more didactic approach was thought to be needed. This section presents data on the relationship-building process.

The data showed that for the newer MATs, there was a realisation that, whilst they may have had a structure in place for a theoretical picture of a MAT, once new schools joined, there would need to be adjustments in relationships. New understandings of responsibilities and representations, and new ways of working were starting to become clearer: *'we're just coming to the point where the fog is clearing'* (trustee, Pastures New). Given that, according to the trust boards, these MATs were taking on new schools in order for both the MAT and the school to succeed, trustees were aware of the delicate negotiations that would be needed, in order to build a bespoke relationship with each joining school, and to acknowledge the reduction in agency and autonomy of school leaders, and such negotiations would have to be *'very carefully considered to begin with'* (LGB Chair, Hazeldene).

For some of the MATs, a positive, previously-established professional relationship with a joining school signalled a smooth transition to the new, more formal MAT status, as with this CEO:

'[St Mary's] got an RI judgement, I was asked to support them [...] and they got a 'Good' judgement, and then we carried on working with them, cos that's what they wanted us to do. And then for them, and their governing body, it just felt a natural thing for them to come into the Trust' (CEO, Pastures New).

Where relationships between academies were already well-established, such as the one above, there was generally a 'closeness' of staff across the academies and a mutually trusting relationship, which eased the move. In these cases, CEOs were aware of limitations and capabilities of their staff: *'I know her limitations, I know what her capabilities are'* (CEO, Pastures New), and were thus able to tailor the support and challenge to their needs.

Likewise, where MATs had been formed from a group of schools who had previously worked together, or where there had been a movement of staff from one academy to another, there was a shared knowledge of the strengths of each other's schools, and of the expertise in various areas, which academy leads were able to draw on, and this included their own strengths, as leaders:

'I know who is strong in Liz's academy [...] I also know what Liz's strengths are, cos I've worked alongside her, and vice versa. So, we are able to draw upon that...speed dial!' (Principal, Heron Trust).

At Hazeldene, all the senior leaders, and the CEO, had worked together under the previous system, in the founding school. The established relationships appeared to have laid the foundations for effective and collaborative working in the new MAT structure, rather than a didactic approach: *'We're not that type of school that's top-heavy, where "I'm the head and this is what we do"' (HoS, Hazeldene).* However, there was some nervousness around how this collaborative working based on strong relationships would apply to schools who were in difficulties joining the MAT, and with whom they had no particular rapport, as illustrated in the interview with trustees:

LGB Chair/Trust Vice-Chair: I think the underlying thing is that the relationships which exist currently are based on relationships that were built before [and] are good enough and close enough for those sorts of things to be discussed easily. If we expanded...

Trust Chair: ...even to two schools I think we'd be stretching...

LGB Chair/TVC: ... if it was a school we'd been asked to take on because it had difficulties, then establishing that sort of rapport would be very challenging, but it would be equally, very necessary (Hazeldene).

The somewhat reluctant tone in these comments was a little surprising, given that they had signed up to be a MAT. However, it shows that these two individuals with responsibility for governance, were aware of the sensitivities of dealing with a new school, and that each school would present a different way of negotiating, depending on their circumstances. As with trustees in the other MATs, these participants wanted to make a success of both the MAT and a joining school, establishing common indicators of quality, whilst preserving a school's individuality. To do this, they were insistent that *'you've got to build relationships in the right way'* (LGB Chair, Hazeldene), and *'read the situation carefully'*:

'There has got to be underlying consistency, but it's got to be handled with sensitivity. You're building a bridge, you're crossing a river, whether it's a box bridge or a suspension bridge - it's got to be read carefully [...] just wanting to get it right' (LGB Chair, Hazeldene).

This focus on building positive relationships was echoed by the LA officer who had been involved in the establishing of Hazeldene MAT:

'It's all down to relationships [...]. If the relationships are wrong, the communications will be wrong; if the communications are wrong then the relationships would make no difference in any case. [...] And people knowing what those responsibilities are' (Senior LA Officer, Tollston).

There was an emphasis in each of the above comments, of the importance in establishing effective working relationships, and central to that, were clear communications with joining schools, and an understanding of responsibilities. *'Wanting to get it right'* was considered particularly important when joining schools had had poor intra-staff relationships, or where the governance-leadership relationship had been unproductive or antagonistic. In such cases, tact and diplomacy were seen to be key skills:

'You need a little bit of flexibility [...] you want to keep the best of what's going on there, but you've got to tackle what might be a fundamental flaw' (LGB Chair, Hazeldene).

An acknowledgement of possible misgivings that potentially joining schools may have had, in one case resulted in an open day, prior to the final decision, for the school staff to question and talk to trust staff and staff at the established academies, which had the effect of allaying many fears:

'We got staff from all three schools together - a kind of speed-dating, put on a buffet after school, "have a wander round and talk to people, ask them about the Trust, about converting to an academy" [...] I think that helped them [...] it was a really, really smooth transition' (Principal, Heron Trust).

These comments reflected an appreciation for negotiation and understanding of past circumstances, and a desire to make the model workable for all parties. The *'flexibility'*

mentioned above was a theme raised by other MATs – having the manoeuvrability to deal with each school on an individual basis, rather than having a blueprint to be applied to each joining school. For example, Chalkdown had a central ethos and standardised framework, to which all academies were required to adhere; it was then at the academies' discretion how to apply these in a way that suited their community:

'The purpose of the standardisation is for structural things so that we don't end up in a mess. The alignment is we've got some really good practice in here, but most of that has come from the schools in the MAT: we provide the framework then we get the principals to put the meat on it' (CEO, Chalkdown).

MAT leaders and trustees were putting trust in their new academy leaders, to both adapt to the MAT structures, but also to build on good practice brought in by new school leaders, and to maintain an element of individuality and agency suitable for the academy's own context.

In the event of a school being forced to join a MAT, there was both concern of *'people thinking that we know it all, and getting upset'* (teacher, Hazeldene) and a recognition that in fact, the MAT was likely to 'know best', and it was in the joining school's interest to work with them, although it might not always be viewed this way:

'It would be them who would need to make all the changes, not us. And I feel their staff would be resentful of that, and possibly be resistant' (teacher, Hazeldene).

For new academy leaders, inheriting a bruised and demoralised staff team during a MAT take-over could be a challenge. One executive principal (Chalkdown Primaries) described discovering *'a culture of mistrust'* amongst staff at one of her new academies, arising through allegedly previous poor leadership and mismanagement. With an *'unbelievably hard'*, start, she realised the need for staff to have confidence in her, and through what she described as her open and transparent recruitment process, including consultation meetings with each member of staff, she aimed to demonstrate that staff could *'trust [her] integrity'*. After a major reformation of staff and recruitment processes of both teachers and support staff, at the time of interviewing, this executive principal had effective management structures in each of the two primary schools. Reflecting a previous comment from the HoS at Hazeldene, this leader believed that the re-building of

the school team from a very fractured and fragmented position could only have been done *'with mutual agreement [and] negotiation [...] it's not a case of "I'm the head, and you'll do it like that'.* She eventually got them on her side by *'being very open and honest and winning them over'* (Executive Principal, Chalkdown Primaries).

Dealing within a take-over where there was an urgent need to act quickly, due to a complete break-down of systems, the data showed that a CEO or executive principal sometimes had to forgo the negotiating stage with new academy leaders and take direct control. This resulted in a more didactic relationship in the initial stages, where new heads-of-school *'needed very directive leadership, you've not got time to negotiate to start with'* (Executive Head, Chalkdown Primaries). With time, as improvements were seen and new school heads grew in confidence, senior leaders would step back from their direct managerial role, forging clarity between the two layers of management, giving school leaders more autonomy over their school leadership. School leaders themselves recognised and welcomed this shift, acknowledging the trust they had earned:

'She found it difficult to step back from the daily operational activities for the school, and quite easily slips back into that role if we let her [...] I have to say to her, "no, actually, that's my role", stand our ground and say, "you're more strategic, off you go!"' (HoS, Tollston Primaries, Chalkdown).

This recognition of the emergence of the different leadership roles as the situation in the schools improved appears to have been based on clear communications between the two 'layers' of senior leaders. However, the MAT hierarchy of management had left a situation where autonomy for leaders was less than that for heads in stand-alone schools, and that is examined in the following section.

4.4.2 The benefits and drawbacks of a centralised system for academy staff

The data has identified that academy staff and leaders found there to be a number of benefits in belonging to a MAT, but that this had to be balanced with a certain loss of control and autonomy. This section reports first on how this affected experienced head teachers, and then the implications for those new to that position, and more junior staff.

4.4.2.1 Balancing reduced autonomy with central support for experienced heads

As documented in Chapter 2, the MAT system has been regarded by some as making a positive change towards teacher professional development. The data supported the notion that for an aspiring and ambitious head teacher, being a leader within a MAT could be a safer option than heading a stand-alone school or academy, as it offered ‘wrap-around support’ from ‘people who are going to look after you’ (ex-sponsor, Chalkdown). This participant argued there were benefits for both an individual academy leader and the MAT leadership, as it allowed flexibility for internal movement, where an academy leader was needing more support, and also provided a safety net for the particular leader:

‘That’s where your crew of safety is; it means that if a head teacher is in an exposed position, they can move them around a MAT, it protects you with a bit of support (ex-sponsor, Chalkdown).

Individual academy leaders were grateful of a system which provided this safety net in the form of an executive principal above them. This figure would sometimes step in where a problem could not be resolved at academy-level - for example, a problem raised by parents, traditionally a role for the LGB:

‘If we have a problem and it still hasn’t been resolved, then the next layer on, you’d go there. Historically you’d go to your governors [...] so you’ve not only got the Principal here, but you’ve got the Executive Principal’ (Principal, Heron Trust).

This system was possibly a way of de-escalating an issue, but it also highlighted the importance of that extra layer of support which the management structure in a MAT provided for school leaders: that sense of not being alone in making big decisions and dealing with problems. This feeling recurred in several interviews with academy leaders, and was seen as a distinct advantage over the sometimes isolatory system of the LA model, as this principal explained:

‘The biggest change being in the Trust, is that you’re not on your own. You might have had a really rotten day, something’s gone wrong, or you have to deal with a situation that you’ve never had to deal with before, whereas before it would be you going home of an evening, thinking “how can I sort this out?”; now, there’s

always someone you can pick up the phone and say “this has happened” (Principal, Heron Trust).

The MAT system also had the advantage over the LA system, as it was seen to be less judgemental:

‘If you were a headteacher, you’d be contacting the LA, which to a certain extent you may feel you’re being judged in your capacity as a head, whereas when you’re contacting each other here, you’re all in it together’ (Principal, Heron Trust).

Where a MAT had academies geographically close together, and with a very similar demographic intake, as the case above, the data indicated that school leaders reaped the benefit of a shared understanding of local issues and were able to support each other in working towards solutions and effective strategies. This was at quite a human level, such as *‘sharing stories about families who live on the estate’* (HoS, Chalkdown), and as an offer of an emotional ‘prop’ under stressful conditions, knowing there was someone else who would listen and understand the local picture.

Within this ‘safety net’ of professional development and support, setting clear boundaries and expectations for MAT-level and academy-level responsibilities was evidently a vital element in school leaders understanding their changed status, but also in defining the level of support which could be expected from the MAT central team. For some CEOs, as well as having *‘control of our destiny’* (CEO, Pastures New), part of the motivation, challenge and *‘excitement’* of their role was coaching their school leaders, to develop their roles within the MAT, which had in effect, created a *‘big staff team’* (CEO, Pastures New). For their part, academy leaders across the study valued their CEO’s experience, personal passion and drive which underpinned the support offered. One senior leader acknowledged how his CEO’s education expertise and track-record had enabled her to recognise his own effective track record as a senior leader in education, leading to the formation of trust:

‘She trusts me, she’s backed me superbly [...] She’ll tell me when I’m wrong, she’ll tell me when I’m right, she’ll challenge, support, intervene’ (Executive Principal, Hill Top Academy, Chalkdown).

Similarly, for one head-of-school it was only once she had had the support and confidence of her new executive principal, something which she had found lacking up to that point in her career, that she felt she would be able to step up to the role of executive principal herself, in time:

'I never saw myself at this point, ever, and it's taken somebody to believe in me [...] somebody very positive coming along [...] taking you on board' (HoS, Chalkdown).

However, despite this positive picture, the data identified senior leaders' awareness of a lack of control over their own schools. For some who had been autonomous heads of their own schools, the new central control from the MAT management had felt restricting or signalled a clash of priorities. Whilst one executive principal evidently valued the regular support from MAT staff, and the degree to which they understood her schools' particular circumstances (*'they know the journey we've been on'*), she sometimes felt that systems were arranged to fit the timetable of the MAT, rather than her own:

*'You think "why are they coming and asking me about this now, because **this** is what I've got to do now?"'* (Executive Principal, Chalkdown Primaries).

However, despite this, the participant conceded that having clear policies and processes in place across the MAT, which were applied *'correctly, appropriately and rigorously'*, meant that people understood their roles, knew their responsibilities and importantly, *'everyone's held to account with it'*. There was a compromise, she explained, between *'overkill'* from the MAT, and the fact that their support had produced rapid improvement:

'If I reflect, I have driven the schools much faster and much further than I would have driven without them' (Executive Principal, Chalkdown Primaries).

Senior leaders were therefore evaluating whether the lessening of professional autonomy was worth the benefits of additional, central support. Occasionally, this reduced autonomy proved difficult:

'After having sailed my own ship [...] I'm not my own boss anymore, I'm not. I struggled with it a little bit, for the first few months' (Executive Principal, Chalkdown Primaries).

In time, however, once CEOs had confidence that their leaders were competent, compromises were made, and leaders recovered some autonomy and agency in decision-making and priority-setting. For some senior MAT figures, including trustees, the reduced autonomy was seen as a *'worthwhile compromise'* to *'remove the hassle factor'* of traditional headteacher duties:

'[it] allows you to concentrate on some of the things which really motivate you as a headteacher [...] teaching and learning [...] that's the sort of trade-off' (all quotes Trust Chair, Hazeldene).

This attitude was reflected in comments made to governors about their changed role and responsibilities. The CEO of Chalkdown, in her initial meeting with the LAB of Hill Top Academy told governors:

"We shall be taking financial control, you don't have to worry about that, we'll look after that at Trust level", and the same with Curriculum and Quality, and that was presented as a done deal' (local governor, Chalkdown, quoting his CEO).

The LAB chair's disappointed reaction to this has already been documented in Section 4.3.3, and implicit to these exchanges was the depiction of both headteacher and governors who found engaging in non-teaching and learning issues a 'hassle'. This was somewhat presumptuous, as headteachers (and governors) had, until joining the MAT, been responsible for recruitment and finance of their own schools as an integral part of their autonomous role. The potential for confusion (and possibly resentment) around role accountability and reduced autonomy, identified amongst governors in Section 4.3, was equally pertinent for school leaders, regardless of any alignment of values, which the trustees hoped would act as a unifier.

4.4.2.2 Challenge, support and development for less-experienced leaders and more junior staff

For leaders new to their role, with little or no managerial, business or financial experience, and who had not operated autonomously in the past, central MAT staff were indeed a valued source of support. These new leaders were keen to take up the support given, which was seen as *'positive'* and *'supportive'*, as the MAT was *'very interested to know what's happening in each school, and what you're doing about it'* (HoS, Forest Row,

Chalkdown). They recognised that the MAT was balancing challenge and trouble-shooting within their academies in order to get best results, and their involvement was integral to success:

'It's very much a supportive idea, and they'll send people to work with us as well, to help us look at what we can do about it' (HoS, Vale Grove, Chalkdown).

As for senior academy leaders, the proven educational track-record of success of the MAT management and school improvement team instilled confidence in class-based academy staff, with its focus on colleague observations, co-teaching, or out-of-class discussions, and was the basis of a trusting relationship across MAT staff:

'For them to be able to come in day-to-day, teaching [...] "this is what you need to be doing to get to Outstanding" [...] they trust what you've got inside of your academy, ... that breeds confidence within staff' (Assistant Principal, Hill Top Academy, Chalkdown).

In addition, the MAT system offered the opportunity for sharing of good practice across academies, with teaching staff being deployed to support their colleagues. Administrative staff, too, were conscious that being part of the MAT could enhance their own professional development, with the trust and support of the CEO enabling them to branch out with other joining schools, which *'would develop us, I'd find that really interesting'* (administrative officer, Hazeldene).

This support and training for staff was largely provided in-house, or at least there were certain external providers which endorsed by the MAT and which all academies had to attend. The data has shown that this contributed to the development of loyalty and commitment to the MAT amongst staff, but it brought into question whether this was at the expense of a plurality of voices and views in senior management, which would be more likely to occur through building networks with peers *outside* the MAT. Traditionally, head teachers would have been part of a borough-wide Primary/Secondary Heads group. Under the MAT system, the boundaries were defined by the MAT, rather than the borough within which individual academies lay. In fact, the data suggested that the agenda and views of the LA might be seen to conflict with those of the MAT:

'Cos obviously you can get conflicting views, what the MAT is saying, and what Tollston is saying' (HoS, Chalkdown).

When I asked this participant, and her HoS colleague if they would have found it useful to be in a borough-wide headteachers' network, there was some reluctance to answer, and I had the impression that this was in part caused by a fear of appearing disloyal to the MAT. There was the implication of a desire for these relatively new school leaders to be immersed in the MAT consensus, with a reluctance to be involved in debate which could include dissonant voices or opposing views – views which could question values and systems of the MAT. Indeed, having a consensual approach was seen to help with the smooth-running of the academies. In the interview with the two principals from Heron Trust, they were finishing each other's sentences, building on one another's thoughts, and seemed proud not to present any differing views:

Liz: We are very much like-minded in our approach, and I think that's why it works. [...] there's never any differing of views...

Caitlin: ...or conflict of opinions.... (Principals, Heron Trust).

In cases where academy leads shared a similar demographic school intake, and already knew each other, as with the principals, above, they were more likely to encounter similar problems, which might partially explain the desire for agreement and consensus:

'Chances are you will have had the same issues...and it's constantly sharing' (Liz, Principal, Heron Trust).

This also stopped the role being what this principal termed the lonely job of a traditional head, as mentioned in 4.4.2.1. This high value on consensual debate was not limited to school leaders and is discussed in section 4.5.1 in relation to the trust boards.

The data presented above has shown the benefits staff had felt of being part of a MAT, in terms of their professional development, the sharing of similar issues with colleagues who understood their situation and context, and a welcome for a context which supported consensuality of views. A trade-off in reduced autonomy was acknowledged (although not universally); the next section will look at how CEOs judged the degree of autonomy to give their school leaders.

4.4.3 A need for leaders to demonstrate responsibility with autonomy

The data indicated that the amount of delegated power to an incoming school that a CEO was willing to give, depended on the school's current state of governance and leadership, academic results, Ofsted grade and in the cases of Chalkdown and Pastures New, how far school leaders had been responsible with their autonomy in the past. Where these factors were negative, the MAT intervened to avoid the school being left in a vulnerable position.

There was a general feeling amongst CEOs and trustees, that if an 'Outstanding' Ofsted-graded school were to join their MAT, it would be given a large degree of autonomy, as it evidently had the capacity to be able to run efficiently:

'If I bring an Outstanding school into the trust, why would I tell them how to run their school? I'm not arrogant; I wouldn't suggest my way is any better than anyone else's' (CEO, Pastures New).

'If a school came along and who are doing fine, they're not going to suddenly say "oh you can do everything for us", and I wouldn't necessarily want to, and we haven't got the capacity anyway' (CEO, Hazeldene).

More generally, for joining schools, CEOs and trust boards appeared to welcome a flexible approach, open to keeping in place any existing systems deemed to be effective, whilst engaging in negotiation around new roles and responsibilities within the new MAT structure:

'If it's a failing school that's different, but in a school with strong governance [...] there is flexibility - how far a school would be able to manage its own finances would depend very much on [previous performance]' (Trust Chair, Hazeldene).

Reflecting this view, Pastures New had a funding system which was based on a sliding scale of contributions from each school, depending on their Ofsted rating, with a lower-graded school paying more, *'because the needs, and the capacity for the school to run itself are different'* (CEO, Pastures New). When I put this system to a trustee of another MAT, she described it as *'hitting them when they were down'* (trustee, Chalkdown). The CEO defended his position, as he believed the prospect of contributing less gave lower-graded schools the motivation to improve, which in turn, earned them more autonomy:

'If I said to a school [...] that initially it would be 6%, but if you show progress in 2 years' time, it might go to 5% or 4%. Because at the minute [...] you've not got the capacity, but in a few years' time, you [...] might be able to manage the budget better, so you can have more of the money [...] It gives people the motivation to say, "let's utilise the resource we've got, and let's benefit from it, and then we'll get more of our autonomy back"' (CEO, Pastures New).

This perspective may be open to question, but this CEO framed his position in terms of school improvement, where schools had to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and take steps to improve. He claimed it was not a question of *'removing people's autonomy'*, as he saw the MAT system as one of collaboration and support, but he felt it was reasonable that the amount of delegated power and autonomy he gave to an incoming school would depend on what the school did with that autonomy and responsibility:

'As a head teacher I've given lots of people lots of autonomy. If they show that they're not responsible with that, then I might pull it back, for a time, until they learn that they have to be responsible with it [...] otherwise the whole place becomes totally vulnerable [...] children only get one education' (CEO, Pastures New).

The justification for this position centred on responsibility for the children's education and was echoed in other MATs. For Chalkdown's CEO, autonomy in academy leadership came with the confidence to fulfil the role, with the MAT only formally intervening if the leader was not coping with the responsibility:

'They have to convince themselves that they can do the job first – there's a lot of autonomy at that level, even though you've got all this structure [...] if we're intervening, it means you're not really doing your job' (CEO, Chalkdown).

Senior leaders themselves understood the necessity for the CEO to be making constant judgements on their capabilities as leaders, in order for the organisation to succeed, and that autonomy was not automatic:

'In the Trust, it is earned autonomy [...] she's making judgements based on what her judgement of your school is; what her judgement of your leadership is; and adjusting that accordingly' (Executive Principal, Chalkdown Primaries).

Senior leaders appeared to realise that the shift in the balance of power towards them would occur once CEOs felt confident in their ability to show 'responsibility' with autonomy. The Pastures New CEO was clear that where he had more confidence in his headteachers, he was keen to involve them in the process of staff and system restructuring, as he saw his role to *'motivate and support [the headteacher] in every way'*, just as the CEO of Chalkdown, saw her role, and that of her MAT team one of *'monitoring, challenging and supporting'*.

The constant appraisal by the CEOs of their executive principals and of these executive principals of their academy leaders indicated a preference for a model which involved tailoring to suit each academy's needs, and areas of strengths and weaknesses, rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' model, which tended to be implemented in the initial stages. However, how this model would change or indeed survive as the MAT expanded, was unknown: what the senior managers did assume was that the CEO would have less direct involvement in the individual academies, and that they would be given more autonomy over their own schools.

4.4.4 Summary of Section 4.4

The data presented in this section has highlighted the importance of intra-MAT relationships, and how positive relationships contributed to the building of trust amongst academy leaders, and with their CEOs. Having shared understandings of each other's schools, their student populations and communities, and even personal and professional qualities was an indicator of a cohesive way of working. This shared working and understanding amongst school leaders within a MAT led to a feeling of non-judgemental support, of *'not being on your own'*, compared to the sometimes-isolated role as an LA headteacher. There was appreciation of the *'wrap-around support'*, mixed with challenge provided by the extra layer of CEO, executive principal and central MAT staff. With this, a high degree of consensus amongst senior leaders was identified, with little appetite for conflicting views, which added to the welcome feeling of not being alone in the job of academy leader.

However, the support and collegiality provided by belonging to the MAT was balanced with the realisation that personal and professional agency had been reduced, and with it, autonomy. For leaders with no prior headship experience, this was not necessarily an issue: it was more concerning for ex-headteachers who had previously had control over their own school. In-house training and staff development was welcomed, although it resulted in little opportunity for staff to mix with LA school staff, and may have been a contributing factor in the overall acceptance of a preference for consensual views.

There was an examination of how trust in school leaders was built on a knowledge of their capabilities and capacity to be responsible with autonomy, with signs of 'autonomy by Ofsted grade'. Where CEOs had previously worked with their new leaders, they knew their '*capabilities and limitations*', and so could offer them the appropriate degree of responsibility: it was sometimes a case of letting go and trusting the staff to operate independent of central MAT tight control. It was clear, however, that with a school joining the MAT, where a school leader or governors had not shown themselves to be responsible with autonomy, then certain CEOs and trustees would have not hesitated in taking that away, until a point was reached where they could 'earn' it back.

Thus, there was at play, a constant judging by CEOs of their senior leaders of their capacity to be responsible with autonomy. Even so, there was general agreement that, where 'deserved,' negotiation was at the heart of building firm, cohesive structures and effective relationships. Whether between new school leaders and existing staff, or between the trust board and governors and senior leaders of a school joining the MAT, '*building a bridge*' to establish new ways of working was seen to be essential for MATs such as these to create a clear, cohesive model of education, within this relatively new landscape. This was also likely to affect how participants viewed and experienced the legitimacy of their MAT, the theme of the next section.

4.5 What does legitimacy look like for MATs?

This section presents data in relation to RQ3, regarding the perceived legitimacy of the MAT. Whilst there is no one definition of legitimacy in this context, through an examination of the data, I have identified a number of relevant themes as being indicative of how participants would frame their understanding and experiences of their

organisation's legitimacy. As detailed in Chapter 3 (Sections 3.6.2 and 3.7), the interview process allowed for themes which arose in earlier interviews to be raised in subsequent ones; likewise, the iterative, data-led approach to data analysis facilitated the identification of themes as the research progressed, rather than stating these at the beginning. The theme of legitimacy was one of these emerging themes which I found to be integral to the other two research questions – the governance and accountability structures of the MATs (RQ1), and the subsequent impact on the autonomy and agency of those involved (RQ2). The elements which I have identified as being closely linked to legitimacy in relation to the overall themes of this research, are presented below. There will be other elements, such as pupil success, financial probity, etc., which are not directly relevant to the study, and are not included.

Section 4.5.1 presents data on an authority legitimised through appropriate knowledge and expertise. This includes the expertise of the trust board, the CEO and the central MAT team. It looks at data in relation to the issue of succession planning for the CEO, and the type of figure who participants thought should lead their MAT, with the identified disagreements and tensions this provoked. Section 4.5.2 presents data on how the MAT is seen to be legitimate through its underpinning values and ethos. It probes some of the tensions around the desire to balance education and business values, and the different perspectives of participants on this controversial issue. It also looks at the different interpretations of how, by becoming a MAT, this may have had an impact on the founding school's values, reputation and capacity to be effective.

4.5.1 Authority legitimised through appropriate knowledge and expertise, and a plurality of views

This section presents data on the expertise of the trust board and the CEO, and how this contributes to the concept of the MAT being legitimate.

4.5.1.1 Trust Board expertise

The CEOs in this study were seeking non-executive trustees with either generic director skills, exemplified by a number of trustees in one trust being *'very senior – leaders, directors or managers within the larger companies that they've worked for'* (CEO, Chalkdown); or more specific skills, such as expertise in finance, HR and law; or on occasions, a mixture of the two. Education expertise was valued: Hazeldene appointed

their former LA School Improvement Advisor; Chalkdown appointed what the trust chair termed, their 'education trustee' from the field of higher education, although this was only some time after the MAT had been established; however, by Phase 2, a second trustee from the field of education had been appointed. Pastures New, as a CofE trust, was obliged to draw a certain percentage of its board from the Church. One of these 'church' trustees was the trust chair, and also an ex-secondary headteacher, thus, in addition to the CEO, bringing education expertise to the Board, although not of the primary sector: *'I have practical things I can bring, but also an understanding and awareness of what [the vision] might look like and how you can get there'* (Trust Chair, Pastures New). At Heron Trust, at least one trustee, in addition to the CEO, had an education background.

In line with the findings presented in Section 4.4.2 on trust and relationships amongst MAT and academy staff, intrinsic to how the trust board was thought to work effectively, was the presence of secure and trusting relationships amongst the trustees: the opinion each held of fellow-trustees, on their reputation, skills and expertise and the quality of the decisions made. One trustee at Chalkdown (the 'education trustee') believed that all members of the trust board, both executive and non-executive directors, had to trust each other to make quality decisions and to scrutinise those decisions, given they could not be experts in everything:

'People are not sufficiently savvy, and I include myself in that, because I don't get involved in [other areas] – there are better minds than mine, and I have trust that they know what they're talking about! And then the bits that I do know what I'm talking about, I'm happy to engage and influence, so you do have to have representation' (trustee, Chalkdown).

Trustees therefore trusted those with knowledge in an area that was not their expertise, to be their 'representatives', to take the lead and provide appropriate scrutiny and challenge. Being part of a *'fairly balanced group'* (member, Pastures New), gave trustees a sense of security and legitimacy in their decision-making. Within this decision-making process, there was a desire expressed for agreement within the trust board, to strive for *'the consensus view'* (trustee, Pastures New), and for *'value judgements'* to be *'done by consensus'* (Trust Chair, Chalkdown), which was a reflection on how the trust boards of

each of these MATs required consensus, consistency and alignment from their academies in relation to adherence to the MAT's values and ethos, and their enactment at local level, as documented in Section 4.4

However, an underlying concern amongst trustees was their lack of sufficient understanding of educational issues to present challenge in that area. According to the 'education trustee' at Chalkdown, the CEO and executive directors had to do a lot of explaining to help the trustees understand the language of education. She had noted that these trustees seemed to be translating the language to a business model, and feared this may pose a threat to education values being maintained at the heart of the MAT, especially given their lack of understanding:

'A lot of the "business-people" are really struggling to get a handle on the [education] language and terminology. They're trying to translate all the time in terms of accounting structures, finance [...] and they can't understand why it's done in a particular way' (trustee, Chalkdown).

There was also a question of how far non-executive directors not from an education background, felt confident in being able to hold the CEO and the rest of the executive team to account if their decisions and judgements were based on business values. Interviews with trustees from business and managerial backgrounds, identified a confidence in their role to challenge, question and probe business-type decisions, but found less confidence in education matters. There was an awareness that their lack of knowledge might compromise trustees' ability to make informed challenges:

'I am no schools expert, and whilst there is no thought that [the CEO] would try to pull the wool over our eyes, our lack of knowledge meant that she could' (Trust Chair, Chalkdown).

This could have serious implications for the enactment of trustees' responsibilities and powers. Trustees were involved in high-level decision-making and were accountable for the whole MAT, as well as holding the CEO to account. If there was the possibility that, because of trustees' lack of educational expertise, the CEO could present information to them for which they were not qualified to be true scrutineers, then there was a question over the basis on which important decisions about the children's education were being

made. Chalkdown's trust chair implicitly admitted that the Board's lack of educational legitimacy presented a serious problem:

'We desperately need training for new non-executive directors, coming into education, because we may have all the business skills in the world, but it's a different world, it's a different language' (Trust Chair, Chalkdown).

This suggested a mis-match between expectations of being a MAT trustee, and the reality. Only through being involved in the MAT, had this trust chair recognised the need for training in educational skills and understanding. He believed this would serve the dual purpose of up-skilling the trustees, and offering greater support to the CEO, who in his words, was under a *'lot of pressure'* due to the expertise being concentrated in her and her MAT staff. When Chalkdown did appoint a trustee with education expertise, some years after the MAT had formed, the Chair felt it *'was a breath of fresh air'*. However, as another trustee from Chalkdown suggested, and indeed the CEO herself had intimated, there may be a role for non-education experts on trust boards, to provoke new and unexpected debate:

'I think it probably is useful to have someone in education, but on the flip-side I also think it's useful to have people not involved in education, because we ask the stupid or obvious questions! [...] we're looking at it from a different way [...] So, I think there is a balance to be had' (trustee, Chalkdown).

That balance between business and education skills seemed key to the type of questions trustees asked of each other and put to the CEO and principals. Where a Board was made up of a majority of trustees from the business world, there could be a danger of business values dominating. However, a trustee from an education background could act as a check to balance and interrogate business values and frame a space for a genuine discourse around children's education, beyond that of the usual limited narrative of 'achievement'.

This raised issues around how the MAT was steered, how far negotiations played a key part in discussions around the vision and values it adopted, and whose voices were most prominent in such debates. The lack of plurality in trust boards was raised in Section 4.2.2.2, in terms of the rather opaque process of trustee appointment, along with the

sense that many trustees were already known to the CEO, and ‘just slid into’ the position; a lack of diversity on trust boards in terms of community and cultural representation was noted in Section 4.3.1; and the desire for consensus has been noted earlier in this section. The skills and expertise of the CEO were central to the diversity and make-up of the trust board, and how different voices were heard. This, along with how trust boards planned for a future without the incumbent CEO, are discussed in the following section.

4.5.1.2 The CEO as ‘the jewel in the crown’: the fragility of a system which relies on ‘leader-as-hero’

Each of these CEOs had spent their whole career in education, from classroom teacher to headteacher, to school improvement partner. The Pastures New CEO had a track-record which was typical of each of the other CEOs:

‘I’ve been a head for 25 years, I’ve been an NLE ever since they came into being, I’ve been a Core 1 Teaching School, so nine years we’ve been delivering school-to-school support, and with a good track’ (CEO, Pastures New).

The CEOs appeared to be well-regarded by both the LA and DfE, with whom they had regular contact. Chalkdown’s CEO, emphasising how dependent her LA were of her expertise, believed the LA *‘needed to keep me engaged more than I needed them’*; Heron Trust’s CEO claimed that, through his prior successful record as school leader, he had a good relationship with the LA - *‘the Outstanding leadership badge opens up doors’*; and the Tollston LA officer praised Hazeldene’s CEO for *‘Outstanding leadership’*. This high regard was based around the work that the CEOs had undertaken around school-improvement, their Outstanding Ofsted grades, their contribution to the National College work and through being National Leaders of Education (NLE). Two (Chalkdown and Pastures New) were also part of Teaching School Alliances, and one was an Ofsted inspector. For trustees, being part of a successful MAT headed by someone competent, and well-respected in the education field, contributed to their own professional profile and reputation:

‘I’m just a volunteer [but] I still have responsibility, and I wouldn’t want to be involved in an organisation that wasn’t appropriately run – I have my career on the line as well’ (trustee, Chalkdown).

Typically, trustees were working full-time, with demanding jobs, often in positions of high responsibility, or running their own businesses. They were devoting much time and expertise to their MAT which were (in all cases other than the Heron Trust) under-going rapid change and had to abide by external governance and regulatory frameworks. Whilst it may have been advantageous for these individuals to be involved in successful MATs as a way of enhancing their professional and philanthropic profile, the responsibilities of the volunteer role were substantial. As several trustees said, the 'buck' stops with the trust board, and there was clearly a worry amongst some that if things went wrong, then they would be held accountable, with the obvious impact on their own personal and professional reputations.

For staff and parents of schools being taken on by a MAT, they too wanted to see a '*track-record for doing well*' (community governor/parent, Chalkdown). They needed reassurance that the skills, experience and confidence of the MAT were at the highest level, and that the MAT had robust, tried and tested systems based on a grounded understanding of education. One senior school leader was relieved that their new sponsor (after re-brokerage) had experience in running both primary and secondary schools to an outstanding level, compared to their previous sponsor who had no experience at compulsory-level education:

'What we are getting is real skill, rather than just an initiative to tick a box – we're getting what we need' (Assistant Principal, Hill Top, Chalkdown).

A trust with relevant, excellent expertise in the compulsory education sector, which offered tailored support was seen to '*breed confidence within staff*' (Assistant Principal, Chalkdown) and enabled the MAT to be seen as a legitimate leader and partner. The data showed that the CEO was key in terms of instilling this sense of legitimacy and confidence in the organisation, with their personality, experience and knowledge being pivotal to the success of a MAT. Senior leaders referred to the CEO's historical and current success in school improvement; to the CEO obtaining successive 'Outstanding' Ofsted judgements in their original schools; and to their enthusiasm and drive, in ensuring success within all the schools in their MAT, as their '*outstanding*' qualities would '*permeate through*' to schools joining the MAT (Tollston LA Officer).

Whilst each CEO regarded their background and expertise qualifying them for the role of CEO (*'If I looked at the skills set that you'd probably need, I thought I had a lot going [for me]'*, CEO Chalkdown), they were beginning to realise that being a leader with the appropriate authority to bestow legitimacy on the whole MAT, required a very different skill-set from that of head-teacher, requiring a shift away from a focus on education to large-scale management:

'Even what I read has become different [...] it would normally have been [...] a lot of education [...] but [now] I'm looking much more at "drive", "earned autonomies", "radical candour", [...] I'm looking at skills [...] or qualities that are not natural to me' (CEO, Chalkdown).

With the new, substantial responsibilities intrinsic to the role, some CEOs admitted feeling exposed and vulnerable, either in their relationships with school staff, as here:

'You're very vulnerable because you are the person that can be suggesting change needs to happen [...] it's just conflict all the way' (CEO, Chalkdown);

or in the perceived motivation for expanding the MAT:

'I have been left feeling very vulnerable over the issue with [the third school] joining us' (CEO, Pastures New).

From these experiences, a question arises, whether there was a sufficient pool of prospective CEOs with the necessary mix of education, business and leadership skills, as well as a capacity to cope with the exposure and vulnerabilities of such a high profile and highly accountable role, that this position demanded. This was causing some tension amongst certain trust boards when discussing CEO succession planning. As most of these CEOs were approaching retirement age, their trust boards were entitled to ask who would be replacing them, and what skills they would be seeking. Each of these MATs was formed on the desire and drive of the founding headteacher, now CEO, as acknowledged by trustees:

'The whole MAT was based on her. And it was her expertise that allowed us to become a sponsor' (Trust Chair, Chalkdown).

The willingness of senior leaders to adopt the values and ethos of the MAT was thought to be as a result of their high regard for their CEO, and thus precarious in the event of change:

'Some of them know they're in a Kafka-esque play, and they're playing it [...] but it's that sense of values and ethos, and whether they actually own them, and I think some of them on the SLTs [senior leadership teams] are going through the motions' (trustee, Chalkdown).

The fragility of a system which was only upheld by staff 'playing the game' due to the high regard they had of the current CEO was apparent to at least one trust chair, in relation to the success of the MAT being totally reliant on academy leaders' adherence to its values:

'If the MAT has an idea of what missions and visions should be, and the schools don't take that, then the MAT has no role' (Trust Chair, Chalkdown).

The data implies, therefore, that the MAT appeared to rely on the CEO as *'the jewel in the crown'* (Trust Chair, Chalkdown), with the implication that without their initial leadership, the MAT would be in a different place. However, there was disagreement about who the next CEO should be. Chalkdown's CEO thought it was not essential to have an educator at the top, owing to the very different nature of the role compared to headteacher: *'I think you could [be a CEO without an education background]'*. In the absence of a successor of this CEO's calibre, the trust board had concluded that the role might have to be split: a CEO from the business world to oversee the MAT business, and a Director of Education responsible for school improvement, standards, and the 'business' of education, because:

'Whether you like it or not, we are a business, and our business is education. If you went into industry, the CEO might not come from that industry, but the operations director almost certainly will' (Trust Chair, Chalkdown).

When I probed about any potential conflict between the business-minded CEO and the education-focused Director that this model may cause, the trust chair at Chalkdown dismissed it, as *'education is our business'*. The Heron Trust had adopted the structural aspect of this model, with a CEO overseeing the business side of the MAT, and an executive principal with responsibility for school improvement across its academies and

managing the three principals. The difference between these two models, was that both CEO and executive principal at the Heron Trust were from education backgrounds, with the CEO, as founder of the MAT, being the ex-headteacher of the original academy, and holding a very strong and respected track record in education. For some, the non-educator as CEO model was not seen to be a problem, so long as the individual was able to develop and deliver the education vision, or at least be willing to learn how:

'I think the key here is how you develop and deliver an educational vision – I don't think you have to have been a headteacher to do that, but if you're bringing in a CEO who is business-oriented, how do they know to keep that vision or what that vision should be? They might learn it - they might' (ex-sponsor, Chalkdown).

There was a lack of conviction to this view, with the participant's tentative 'they might', and was perhaps an aspiration rather than a whole-hearted endorsement of business-leader as CEO.

A flatter model was preferred by Chalkdown's 'education' trustee, where expertise was shared across the team, rather than all the expertise in the person at the top. Perhaps reflecting her own career in education, this trustee questioned the CEO-as-business-person model, preferring a '*true educator at the top*', and would be unhappy if her CEO were to be replaced by someone who had a great business mind but was not an educator:

'I think you can have anyone in your SLT who can be that bean-counter, but I don't think they should be in charge of the sweet-shop' (Anna, trustee, Chalkdown).

Anna was concerned about the motivation of someone with very little education background seeking to become a CEO of a MAT, and in effect, raised the issue of '*career MAT CEOs*':

'Someone might pretend they're an educationalist [...] they've made it a career plan to be a CEO of a MAT by doing one year in school. [...] it's one thing saying, "I'm an educator", but what sort of educator, and what sort of trajectory has that person had?' (Anna, trustee, Chalkdown).

This trustee identified qualities in her CEO which she worried could be lacking in someone who was a non-educator, or an educator with little education experience. Several times

Anna used the term 'integrity' to describe her CEO, as well as 'honourable', and suggested that the reason the current model worked at Chalkdown, was that individual academy leaders trusted and respected their CEO, in large part because of her education experience. Because of this trust and respect, Anna believed that staff were prepared to implement changes and follow practices which not all of them whole-heartedly believed in, and which, with a different type of CEO, they might resist:

'But what you'd call the lack of ... they're not clones, because they've all got their individual...but that strong message of non-negotiables, you know, that we're all doing it this way or the high-way, that is working well, but it's only working well because the person at the top has got integrity' (Anna, trustee, Chalkdown).

This raised issues about succession planning in a MAT when a CEO from a strong education background left, and this governor's reservations represented the views of many participants:

'The CEO has to live and breathe education, as we're all in the business of education, but if they don't live and breathe those values..' (governor, Chalkdown).

As Anna suggested, above, academy staff may have been willing to go along with procedures, aims and visions demanded by a trusted CEO, from their own profession, but how far they would be prepared to follow directives from a non-educator would remain to be seen. The concept of the heroic head, which this could arguably illustrate, was questioned by one participant, who wondered if concentration on individual leaders was somehow missing the point:

'We didn't always used to have leaders who were so heroic, and yet we used to have some very good schools; of course, leadership is important, but individuals might not be so important' (ex-sponsor, Chalkdown).

The delicacy of a system which was based on 'leaders-as-heroes' troubled some participants, with its precarious system of leadership and could jeopardise the MAT's claim to be a legitimate education organisation. The following session examines legitimacy through the lens of values and ethos.

4.5.2 Legitimacy through the underpinning values and ethos of the MAT

This section presents data on a further aspect of claims to legitimacy: the underpinning values and ethos of the MAT, including the tensions noted between business and education values, and the impact of MAT expansion on the founding school's values, reputation and capacity to be effective.

4.5.2.1 A tension between business and education values

With the need for a MAT to operate as a business, and that business being education, it would be important for the board to demonstrate its legitimacy as a provider of education through its ability to balance business and education values in a way which benefitted the children most. By their own accounts, the CEOs' values placed equality and children at the centre:

'Everything about me is linked to equality [...] community and inclusion [...], I've had that at the heart of everything' (CEO, Chalkdown);

'We need to do something for the children in this area' (CEO, Heron Trust).

The MAT system provided the opportunity to *'open up the space, where you can start to talk about the meaning of education, the purpose of education'*, according to Chalkdown's ex-sponsor, where innovation and entrepreneurship would enable a move away from uniformity. In reality, this participant felt that in many cases, the confusion between education and business values had in fact led to a constraint in innovation, and a system which was in danger of being applied rigidly, regardless of context, and which was no longer formally accountable to local communities:

'The classic argument for creating markets is that you have market and democracy; but what we've got is a bit of market, but we're not sure...and we've got no democracy [and] what works in the context where there are a lot of family pressures, is just very different [in other contexts]' (ex-sponsor, Chalkdown).

Yet whilst some questioned the reliance on the 'business model', the trust boards regarded this model as central to the effective functioning of the MAT. The business skills and expertise of members or trustees were seen to be beneficial, and a reason why some of them had been appointed:

'[The Member's Chair] owns his own business anyway, so it was quite useful to bounce ideas off him' (Hazeldene Trust Chair).

Given this, maybe it was not surprising that the data showed the language of business had often been adopted. Senior figures were clearly drawing on such terminology when referring to the MAT's promotion in the 'market', with references to 'brand' and 'delivery':

'Is the business model enabling those schools to deliver what they aim to deliver? And it's about brand and marketing those things which are about being a successful MAT' (Tollston Senior LA Officer).

However, concerns about the dominance of such a model were heard amongst some staff and parents. The sense of a separation of the managers from the essence of the school was a worry, where the organisation was seen to be:

'More of a business to them upstairs now than a school [...] they've lost that part of it still being a school' (support staff, Hazeldene).

The use of the term *'them upstairs'* was an interesting metaphor, given the building was single-storey, but these two quotes, showed an expression of the real tension between the needs of the organisation as a business, and the misgivings of staff and parents. The current, child-centred provision at Hazeldene, as a special school, was regarded by parents as its star quality, and they did not want this ethos to be compromised by business interests. The business model also affected how parents thought their problems might be dealt with by management, and in fact they referred to the MAT as a 'franchise'. In the past, if parents had had a problem with a school, which could not be resolved, they would go to the LA, but now they were alarmed by what they termed 'vested-interests':

'It's not going to be impartial because it's a business, and they're going to want what's best for the academy' (parent, Hazeldene).

Nevertheless, senior leaders of this MAT, now termed 'Directors', rebutted the claim that the MAT would make their values and processes more business-focused, and thus step away from the original school's ethos:

'We're not setting up a business to make money, we're setting it up to provide quality education for a particular group of children' (Senior Leader/Director, Hazeldene).

As seen above, the language of business and marketing pervaded conversations with many individuals, either as a worry, or as a natural reference to the new order.

Chalkdown's trust chair saw the role of principal as engaging with the community, *'marketing the school'*, with the support of his or her local governors. Academy principals were expected to *'buy into'* the MAT vision, and *'sell it to the school leadership team, and the middle leadership team,'* (trust chair, Chalkdown): the language used reflected that of a financial transaction. With this emphasis on the terminology of business and finance, it is pertinent to present the data in relation to what the founding school's values were seen to be, and how becoming a MAT may have had an impact on its reputation as an effective provider of education, examined below.

4.5.2.2 The impact of expansion as a MAT on the founding school's values, reputation and capacity to be effective.

For a CEO, and many school staff, a shared ethos and values were the pre-requisite and foundation to all decisions about which schools should join the MAT:

'I'm a great believer in aligning ethical purpose and moral values, so I wouldn't [...] jump into bed with anybody' (CEO, Pastures New).

Some participants were unsettled that taking on schools ran the risk of *'diluting the ethos'* of the founding school (trustee, Pastures New). This was especially apparent in Hazeldene MAT, where the founding academy was a special school, where teaching and support staff were worried that if a mainstream school joined them, it might *'dilute'* the original values and identity of the founding school:

'I don't know if you'd lose your identity, and the quality might go, because you're trying to do too many things [...]. We wouldn't want to dilute [what we do]' (teacher, Hazeldene).

Hazeldene teachers could not see any real advantage to being in a MAT, as they already did *'an amazing job'* (teacher, Hazeldene) supporting other schools. They were concerned

about a loss of school identity and a negative impact on the 'quality' of education that they currently provided. Teachers thought that in a MAT, staff's attention would be diverted to the other schools, leading to a 'dilution' of good practice. There was similar resistance to this from support staff at Hazeldene, with again, a reference to 'dilution' of good practice if a mainstream school joined: *'No. I think it would just dilute what we did'* (support staff, Hazeldene).

Even the trust chair at Hazeldene was concerned about poorly-performing schools *'pull[ing] down the whole organisation'*, with the implication that a mainstream school may be in this category. The chair of governors had a more optimistic view, and felt expanding beyond 'special' schools would avoid them being a 'niche MAT', as: *'We want to be part of the education panoply in general'* (LGB Chair, Hazeldene), which was reflected by this parent:

'This school has a very strong ethos, so I wouldn't want to see them taking on new schools, and not using the opportunity [to share that ethos]', (parent Hazeldene).

The data showed that a balancing of views was perhaps most prevalent. Whilst several trustees expressed *'some kind of duty and responsibility'* to support the wider community and to share the values and good practice of the founding school (trustee, Pastures New), they felt that caution was needed in taking on a very poor school, which could 'destabilise' the whole MAT. A balance of 'Good', 'Outstanding', and other schools was what these MATs were generally striving for. Trust board members admitted they could be 'very protective' of their MAT; and whilst acknowledging that they

'All had aspirations to put the MAT ethos into a wider arena', but *'not at any cost'* (trustee, Pastures New).

The data clearly showed some apprehension about a MAT being tempted to step outside of its experience and skills-set, such as the special MAT taking on a mainstream school, or the MAT operating outside its geographical area, and the impact this would have on the founding school's ability to remain effective, along with maintaining its ethos and values. Some participants saw a danger of a MAT over-stretching itself in its ambitious desires, with potentially negative consequences for the original culture and ethos of the school:

'I think there's a lot to be said about really understanding what your culture is, what your strengths and weaknesses are, your skills-sets: if you jump outside that, then you start to stress at the edges [...] I wonder how they cope with the culture?' (trustee, Pastures New).

The danger of *'stressing at the edges'* was compounded by the understanding that MAT expansion would result in more work for the trust boards, and individual trustees, given the government rules were for a maximum number of trustees on a board. In addition, attracting trustees of sufficient calibre and expertise was seen to be a national problem: *'there are not enough non-executive directors to go round'* (Trust Chair, Chalkdown), resulting in external volunteers becoming involved to give advice in certain areas. One trustee was obviously concerned about the implications for Chalkdown, with its continuing plan for growth:

'How big do we aspire to be? How big do we want to grow? [...] We were getting to a size where there weren't enough of us, and we were calling on a lot of volunteers' time to get more involved...' (trustee, Chalkdown).

Each of these worries and concerns, over *'dilution of values and ethos'*, weaker schools *'pulling the organisation down'* and an awareness of the danger of over-expansion for the integrity of the organisation, could be seen as indicators of the fragility of the system where the MATs were striving to demonstrate to their stakeholders that they were legitimate providers of education.

4.5.3 Summary of Section 4.5

Section 4.5 has presented data in relation to RQ3: *What does legitimacy look like for MATs?* It examined how authority was perceived to be legitimised through appropriate knowledge and expertise of those who run the MAT. Trustees were appointed based on their senior positions in their present or past place of work, their expertise in areas deemed to be beneficial for the MAT, such as finance, human resources, management of large organisations and connection with the church (for the CofE MAT). However, there was a troubling acknowledgement of a lack of education expertise amongst trustees, with most boards having only one (two at the most) educational representative. This created a sense of comradely reliance and trust on the skills and expertise of others, a situation

reinforced by the amount of time trustees needed to devote to their role. In turn, this drove a desire for consensus amongst the board, which has been a theme running throughout the data, especially in relation to adherence to the values and ethos of the MAT, and was identified amongst academy staff in Section 4.4. Whilst there were clear benefits to consensus, it also pointed to a disturbing lack of confidence amongst trustees with no education expertise, who could be put in the position of *'having the wool pulled over their eyes'* by a less scrupulous CEO.

This identified the central role of the present CEOs, life-long educators, with an impressive *'track record'* in school improvement. These CEOs were regarded as *'the jewel in the crown'* who had enabled the MAT to succeed, and thus seen as legitimate figures of authority. This presented disquiet over succession planning, and the qualities sought for a replacement CEO. Participants disagreed whether the MAT needed a business or education leader, and if the former were chosen, could compromise the integrity of the organisation. There was deep concern amongst some participants about business values taking precedence over education values, and so shaping the MAT into an unrecognisable organisation, and by extension, its claim to be a legitimate provider of excellent education. Typically, there was pride in the founding school, and a desire to share their ethos with joining schools, so long as this was not *'diluted'* or *'pulled apart'* by a less successful school not sharing their axiological position.

This section has highlighted the fragility of the structures of the MAT system, with an over-reliance on the CEO and their particular traits and qualities, and a relatively small number of individuals with education expertise. It has shown how insecure people have felt in their organisation's ability to retain the integrity and commitment to its core values as an educator, as it grows and takes on new schools with their staff, governors and local communities. Each of these CEOs and trust chairs stressed that the main criteria to take on new schools would be an adherence to the core values of the MAT: yet, as one participant observed, it was quite possible that there was no professional *'ownership'* of these values amongst senior school leaders, and that they may have been just *'going through the motions [...] because the person at the top has got integrity'*.

Chapters 5-7 present a critical discussion of the data presented in this chapter, through engagement with the literature from Chapters 2 and 3.

CHAPTERS 5-7: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

In Chapter 4, I presented the findings of the study, with some initial interpretation of the data. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are a discussion of the findings, where I move deeper into the role of interpreter of the data and make links with the literature presented in Chapters 2 and 3. Taking the phenomenological approach discussed in Chapter 3, I have sought to 'explore, describe and analyse the meaning of individual lived experience' (Marshall and Rossman, 2011:19). Through interviews, I explored how people perceived, described, felt and judged their experience(s) (Patton, 2002). During these interviews, I vocalised my interpretations of their experiences, as a way of encouraging further reflection and reaction, which in turn became part of the data. In this way, I was presenting a 'reconstruction' of participants' experiences, rather than merely holding a 'mirror to their reality' (Schwandt, 1994:129). In these chapters I approach the data in two, interconnected ways. First, by exploring in depth the experiences that individuals shared with me. Second, by standing back from the data, in order to look at patterns, repetitions, resonances with particular themes, and the importance of contextual factors. This layered analysis is done concurrently, to form a rich understanding of people's contextualised experiences, and to show how this contributes to addressing the study's research questions. As documented in Chapter 3 (Section 3.7.1), by framing the data within a mainly inductive thematic analysis, the final themes that I have identified were not pre-conceived, but strongly linked to the data (e.g., Braun and Clarke, 2006).

In examining the data, it has been clear that there are areas of commonality and overlap amongst the three research questions. Whilst recognising this, I have dedicated a chapter to each of the research questions, acknowledging the interconnectedness of the data where appropriate. Chapter 5 examines issues relating specifically to *RQ1: What does governance and accountability mean to those involved in MATs, and what are the practical implications for individuals?* Chapter 6 addresses the issues in *RQ2: What are the implications for those in positions of local leadership and local governance, in terms of autonomy and agency?* Finally, Chapter 7 focuses on the theme of legitimacy, addressing *RQ3: what does legitimacy look like for MATs?*

CHAPTER 5: RQ1: 'WHAT DOES GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY MEAN TO THOSE INVOLVED IN MATS, AND WHAT ARE THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS?'

5.1 Introduction

The models of governance and accountability structures chosen by these MATs had been put in place by the policy-makers – the CEO, the trust board and sometimes the central MAT staff. The move from local governance and accountability to centralised systems had had a profound impact on the policy implementors (academy staff and local governors), and the process was often experienced as 'multi-layered' and sometimes 'messy' (Maguire et al, 2015:486). Drawing on Newman and Clarke's (2009) typology of governance, Section 5.2 studies the complex mix of governance regimes used by the MATs, and the implications for accountability, representation and inclusion across the organisation. It also looks at the reality of 'self-governance' and 'empowerment', which was a driving force behind the move towards academisation and the creation of MATs (e.g., DfE, 2016a; Gunter, 2016).

Section 5.3 studies more closely how accountability was conceptualised and experienced for individuals within the MATs. Referring to Glatter's (2017) work, and using Hooge et al's (2012) model of school accountability, it identifies the largely downward lines of accountability implemented by these MATs. It reflects on the importance of making space for 'fruitful dialogue' (Hooge et al, 2012:13) between the different 'tiers' of governance and management, to give voice to local concerns and priorities, and examines the degree of clarity around new roles, accountabilities and responsibilities. The creation of MATs has complicated how such organisations are held to account, and this section concludes with a discussion on the understandings amongst stakeholders over who is accountable to whom, and how those with diminished power could be expected to be held to account.

5.2 New governance structures defining a shift in the seat of power and the implications of a two-tier level of governance

The analysis of the data shows that due to the governance regimes chosen by the MATs in this study, governance was operating at two levels, that of the trust board and of the local governing bodies (LGBs) of each academy, which had resulted in a two-tier structure of

power and control. Centralised MAT-wide decision-making was enacted through the trust board, who took responsibility for overall governance of the organisation, with the local governors having a much-reduced role in the business of governance. As the data has shown, the resulting change in status for local governors was typically reflected in their change of role to 'local advocates', rather than governors. This section will examine the implications of this hierarchical and asymmetric structure for those involved.

5.2.1 MATs drawing on a complex mix of different governance regimes

From the accounts of all participants in the study, their experiences of the new governance structure were that of the main seat of governance and power lying firmly at the top, in the appointed, non-elected trust board ('As trustees, we are managing a business', Trust Chair, Hazeldene; 'The governance is here [trust board], that's where the responsibility lies', CEO, Chalkdown; 'It's Chalkdown's vision [...]it all comes from the MAT', community governor, Chalkdown). Yet exactly which body held that top level of power was not always straightforward. According to the schemes of delegation of each MAT, it was trust members who appointed trustees, but analysis has shown that the decisions about what type of trustees should be appointed to the trust, were in reality taken by the CEO and MAT staff, with members acting on their recommendations. It was trustees, rather than members, who were acknowledged as holding the real power of governance, and as such, the type of individuals selected for these roles, along with their expertise, was crucial: the role of members was seen to be less powerful, and they were not expected to have the same skills demanded of trustees. Holding a somewhat tokenistic role, they were often described as 'shareholders', with the trustees being regarded as the 'company's directors'. This lack of transparency and in fact honesty over the roles of those leading the MAT in its governance was an example of what Gunter (2011:12) had warned of, in her examination of MATs taking on new schools, of the opacity in the 'discussions and deal-makings' at the top level, which had direct relevance for the academies in their care. It also reflected the concern that others have noted over the somewhat distant relations between the centralised bodies of the trust boards and members and the local stakeholders in terms of the LGBs, staff, parents and community members (e.g., House of Commons, 2017; Tinker 2015), reflecting Rose and Miller's (2010) concept of 'action at a distance'. To date, however, there has been little research

on the relationship between members and trustees in a MAT, and of their understandings of each of their roles in governance and their accountabilities. This research has made a contribution by showing the experiences of such individuals, highlighting the blurring and ambiguity of roles of those in top governance positions, and the implications for how this has affected the perception of who was in charge of the MAT. This has consequences for the understanding of lines of accountability and is examined in Section 5.3.

At local level, the notion of governance had been all but removed, as indicated in two instances by LGBs being renamed Local Advocacy Boards, or Local Academy Boards (LABs), and governors being referred to as 'advocates', a reflection of the 'blurred field' of local school governance which Salokangas and Chapman (2014:383) had warned about with the rise of MATs. This change to local governance was explained by trustees in terms of a 'curtailment' of previously-held powers, in a move to centralise policy across the MAT. It was spoken of in almost paternalistic terms by a number of trustees at Pastures New, as '*relieving*' local governors of the '*onerous responsibilities*' of the task of governance, leaving them '*freed up*' to perform their chief role, to promote the school. Despite this, there were signs amongst some trustees, of an openness to the idea of forming a link between trust board and local advocates, in order to prevent trustees losing track of local issues.

Using Newman and Clarke's (2009:131) analysis of public sector governance regimes, the MATs in this study were having to become 'skilled at facing in multiple directions', seemingly operating as heterarchies (Ball, 2009), drawing on four regimes of governance (hierarchical, managerial, self-governance and network), in their struggle to comprehend and present a coherent structure of power and legitimacy, whilst working within a network of organisations across their multiple schools. Each MAT exerted strong control from the centre, features of both a hierarchical and managerial style. A hierarchical style was reflected in their schemes of delegation, staff and pupil targets, audits and inspections, and their requirement for common standards across their academies, all of which, according to Newman and Clarke (2009), imply process legitimacy. A managerial style of governance was indicated by how the MATs were working within a competitive, business model, with an orientation towards outputs (pupil results and Ofsted gradings). Senior figures tended to use the language of business, such as '*the market*', and '*the*

business, *'selling the vision to the academies leads'*, referring to MAT members as *'shareholders'*, the person in charge as CEO, and trustees and sometimes senior staff as directors. Chapter 6 will also show that the MATs were using Ofsted grades to determine levels of *'earned autonomy'*, which could be seen as an example of managerialism geared around *'outputs'*, rather than processes. This shift in focus amongst MATs towards a business model and a managerial governance model, was legitimised and given authority through its narrative of values enshrined in the language and metrics of a commercial enterprise (e.g., Ball and Junemann, 2012), with its focus on entrepreneurship and competitiveness. However, this modelling of governance roles on private enterprise (Gobby, 2013) was an uncomfortable development for some individuals in the MATs, who were indeed aware that their school was now being *'run like a business'* (Nash, 2013:n.p.), and was a source of tension amongst MAT stakeholders. It highlighted the dilemma MATs would face when selecting a new CEO, and how trustees would wrestle with the contested issue of business versus education values, a theme explored in the discussion around the legitimacy of the MAT in Chapter 7. This grappling with different forms of governance, was new for those in charge of the MAT, where in each case, the CEO had formerly been a headteacher, which would have presented a more straightforward style of governance. This switch could be seen as both an example and indicator of the *'general turbulence'* taking place in public sector governance (Ball, 2011:146). In the case for these MATs, it had a direct impact on local accountability and representation, and certainly challenged the government's assertion that the new MAT-led system presented *'a clearly defined role for local government'* (DfE, 2016a:53).

5.2.2 Centralised decision-making and side-lining of local representatives

The data showed that the implications of adopting this combination of mainly hierarchical and managerial style of governance, with strong central control, were that LGBs/LABs had less authoritative decision-making. In several cases, LGB/LAB agendas and meetings were no longer set by the Chair of Governors, but by the central MAT team, and there was not sufficient time for scrutiny of papers, proposals, or indeed the opportunity or power to offer any meaningful challenge to the academy principal, who now ran the meetings. Nor were there any Local Authority (LA) representatives. There were two reasons given for LA absence: active discouragement from participating by the MAT; and a lack of desire on

the part of local councillors to be involved in a body with no effective power. The implications for this at the local level and the impact of the lessening of the local voice were important issues for many participants, and are discussed in Chapter 6, in relation to RQ2.

The lack of democratically-elected trustees, together with the near absence of LA representatives on the LGB/LABs with their accompanying role of scrutiny, pointed to a worrying democratic deficit (Gunter, 2011) in MAT governance: or indeed, the 'depreciation and demise of participatory democracy' (Kulz, 2015:100). Democratic representation is a feature of hierarchical governance, but without this, there was a danger that these MATs were drawing on the power bestowed through hierarchies, bolstered by the inclusion of representatives of executive and business agencies, but with weakened (or negligible) accountability to their local populations (e.g., Skelcher, 1998). This adoption of some of the principles of managerial governance, together with the lack of local, democratic or stakeholder representation on the trust board, either via the LGB or the LA directly, could lay the MATs open to the charge of a lack of transparency to the 'discussions and deal-makings' (Gunter, 2011:12) involving decisions and actions affecting individual academies. Whilst Gunter was specifically referring to decisions around taking on new schools, there was a lack of transparency in other key MAT-wide decisions, which bore the hallmarks of a *'being done to'* culture, rather than *'done with'*, with little indication of a structure for negotiation between governance levels, resulting in governors *'having a say'*, but being reduced to *'observers'* in the dealings of governance (all quotes from governors). For such individuals, there was no sign of the 'empowerment' promised by a move to belonging to a MAT (e.g., DfE, 2016a), as the next section shall explore.

5.2.3 The experience of self-governance and 'empowerment'

The regime of self-governance, offered by successive governments as the incentive to create and belong to a MAT, appeared to have only been a reality at trust board level: the data analysis has shown that at academy level, there was a clear requirement to 'earn' autonomy, both for local governors and academy leaders. Trust boards were making decisions on whether a school could be trusted to run its own finances for example, based on their past reputation and performance, and CEOs were not afraid to remove a

governing body where they thought it had mismanaged its responsibilities. One of the key drivers of the creation of MATs was the vision of a 'school-led system' (DfE, 2016a), with the promise of self-governance and autonomy from the LA (e.g., Carter, 2016), where the State's role would become one of 'gatekeeper' rather than 'gardener' (Urry, 2000:186). The Academies Programme was a persuasive example of the organisation of political power which used the language of freedom and constraint (Rose and Miller, 2010), promising greater choice to parents, and heralding 'setting schools free from the shackles of local bureaucracy' (Osborne, 2016:n.p.). The CEOs in this study were candid in their desire for self-governance, which they felt forming a MAT would provide, which included having more funds, direct control of the budget and '*control of our own destiny*' (CEO, Pastures New). This reflected Newman and Clarke's (2009:130) identified benefits of self-governance, such as the 'self-empowered' collective or individual, with independent budgets, consumer choice and self-management, free from state bureaucracy. However, in this study, analysis has shown that these conceptions of self-governance were problematic at the local level of governance, and governance was experienced quite differently, depending on which 'tier' an individual belonged to. The appealing features of self-empowerment and self-management, whilst clearly evident at trust board level, were all but absent at the local governance level. Whilst trustees saw themselves as '*managers of the business*', where the buck stopped (Trust Chair, Chalkdown), the implications of the new structure of governance for local governors had resulted in '*hugely diminished*' powers and responsibilities (Executive Principal, Chalkdown), including no longer holding the headteacher to account: these responsibilities had been assumed by the trust board.

Salokangas and Chapman (2014:383) argue that the policy discourse on academisation should be re-focused towards autonomous sponsors and their 'decision-making competence over the academies they run'. As this study has shown, it should also be focused on the change in power relationships between the two tiers of governance, and the implications for governors of their 'reduced' position, alongside the impact on individuals holding the greatest power, trustees and the MAT board. The following section will examine the implications for individuals involved in this asymmetric power relationship.

5.2.4 (Net)working within asymmetric power relationships

If the regime of self-governance was seen to benefit only those in the highest seat of governance, and effectively resulted in an asymmetrical power relationship between central and local governors, then it is worth considering if the MATs were operating within a model of network governance. Network governance has been regarded as an alternative to hierarchical governance in that it brings together the expertise and varying views of multiple stakeholders to offer new solutions (Ball and Junemann, 2012).

Newman and Clarke's (2009) model of network governance emphasised co-ordination between actors as multiple stakeholders who were in partnership, who worked together to deliver complex policy. Others have highlighted the interdependence amongst network constituents (Rhodes, 1997), as opposed to 'hierarchy and independence' (Peterson, 2003:1).

However, these features of network governance were contrary to the systems of governance identified in this study. Between the two tiers of governance, there was little evidence of 'co-ordination between actors' and interdependence. For academy heads and local governors their experience of governance was one of exclusion from the highest seat of power: they were not included on the trust boards, although one of the newer MATs (Pastures New) was considering a model where a lead advocate from a "Good" or "Outstanding" school could be appointed to the trust board (schools with a lower Ofsted judgement were not regarded as suitable), and one executive principal occasionally attended meetings with the MAT executive staff (Chalkdown). The reasons and justifications given for this exclusion of local voices tended to be procedural in nature and had a sense of defensiveness at times: legal mandates on the maximum number of trustees; problems with managing a large governing body; the intricacies involved in giving local governors voting rights; and the danger of crossed lines of accountability. This pointed to an issue around lack of inclusion and diversity within the trust boards, a weakness of network governance identified by Newman and Clarke (2009). It also signified a move towards developing an environment that supported consensus-building, which aimed to 'limit the emergence of implementation resistance' (Ball and Junemann, 2012:6; Marin and Mayntz, 1991). This discouragement of plurality within the MAT was

an identified concern in the study and was a factor in the MAT's perceived legitimacy, further examined in Chapter 7.

Conversely, some of the more negative characteristics of network governance identified by other researchers were present in the MATs' systems of governance. There was an element of interdependency in that the MAT was dependent on its academy leaders and local governors to 'sell' the ethos and vision of the MAT to the staff and parents, provide good education and connect with the local community. For their part, the academies were dependent on the MAT for finance, policy, and all the other elements that enabled it to run as a school. However, as Rhodes (1997) noted in his critique of network governance, these interdependencies were likely to be asymmetric, because of the shift in power from local to central governance and was an example of 'particularistic power games' (Ball and Junemann, 2012:7) where the policy-making process had become the responsibility of the MAT, not the LGB/LAB, but that not everyone was aware of this move. One of the advantages of network governance (for the lay population, at least) was that local citizens become the 'everyday makers of politics' (Bang and Joergensen, 2007; Sorensen and Torfing, 2006; Stoker, 2011:27), and hold the policy-makers to account (Stoker, 2011): a situation which was not reflected in this study. This shifting in power, the rather opaque systems of governance adopted, and distancing of local players from policy-making were all intrinsically linked to accountability within the MAT, and had an impact on how individuals understood and experienced new lines of accountability which a change in governance structure brought. The next section will examine the implications for people within the MAT of these new systems of accountability.

5.3 The implications for stakeholders of a new framework of accountability

The combination of hierarchical and managerial structures of governance adopted by each of these MATs, with its centralised decision-making and policy control, was reflected in their lines and structures of accountability. The blurring of roles between members, trustees and even governors, and the widespread lack of education background amongst those at the highest tier of governance (members) as shown in the data analysis, has raised an issue about accountability in governance within the MATs. This section will examine three factors identified as being of key importance by participants in the study:

the problems with upward accountability, and a case for a more lateral and horizontal structure of accountability (5.3.1); the impact of centralised decision-making on allowing space for Hooge et al's (2012:13) 'fruitful dialogue' with stakeholders at different levels (5.3.2); and the transparency or otherwise of roles and responsibilities of key individuals in the MAT (5.3.3).

5.3.1 Beyond upward accountability: a case for 'upward, downward and lateral' accountability

Within the combination of governance regimes adopted by the MATs, as shown above, the MATs had largely assumed a model of upward or vertical accountability between themselves and their academies, albeit with signs of some horizontal accountability between academies. Addressing the latter first, using Hooge et al's (2012) model of school accountability (see Chapter 2), between academy leaders there were indicators of a more supportive, horizontal or lateral structure of accountability, where senior leaders and academy staff were drawing upon the expertise across the 'family' of academies (as several leaders termed their MAT), as well as tailor-made school-improvement support from the central MAT. This was a sign of the emergence of 'professional learning communities' (Hooge et al, 2012:9) across the MAT, which, for school leaders, was very welcome, and one of the main advantages for being in a MAT, as discussed in Chapter 6.

Despite these encouraging signs, there was no evidence of a process where the MAT was accountable to its academies. Academy leaders were required to present their reports to the trust boards, and were questioned on progress and performance, as were local governors; but there were no signs of a reciprocal arrangement with academy leaders and governors having the opportunity to question trust board members nor scrutinize their reports. Hooge et al's (2012) model of school accountability identified the reporting of school performance indicators and systems of rewards and sanctions for school leaders, as indicators of vertical accountability. They also identified regulatory school accountability as the mechanism of schools reporting to a higher level of authority and compliance with central rules and regulations. However, Hooge et al's (2012) model was directed at schools within the LA system, where schools had a greater degree of autonomy. This study has shown that their accountability model could be applied to the MAT system, but that it has limitations. The central rules and regulations and system of

rewards and sanctions are now applied not only by the headteacher to his or her staff, but also by the central MAT to the headteacher (and in some cases to the governors, who themselves had previously held an autonomous role, then accountable to the LA). The MAT now had that regulatory and accounting role. Applying Hooge et al's model to the present study identified the lack of power that local stakeholders had in demanding that the MAT be accountable to them. Whilst their model requires schools to be accountable to their many stakeholders, I would argue that an equivalence in the academy system would be the requirement of the MAT to be accountable to its 'multiple' academies, their leaders, governors and their communities, and to lay themselves open to questioning. This would be in line with the notion of West et al's (2011) 'participative accountability', identified by Wilkins (2012) as being one of the most challenging types of accountability for academies, as they are independent from the LA, but not from their sponsor. Given this, it is pertinent to reflect on Pierre and Peters' (2005:5) definition of accountability: 'holding those actors delivering governance to the society to be accountable for their actions'. Accountability is aimed at protecting against irresponsibility and provides a controlling mechanism which may raise the quality of the procedures (Carless, 2009; Sztompka, 1999). Analysis has shown that these MATs had very clear demands that academy leaders and local governors were required to be accountable for pupil results, to both the MAT and their community. What was somewhat opaque, however, was how the community the MAT served could play a part in controlling against any 'irresponsibility' shown by the MAT, when the MAT held the power and was only answerable to the DfE. Indeed, parents and non-managerial staff were unclear about their ability to control against any irresponsibility, or to be able to raise any issues with the MAT, given its centralised nature. Wilkins and Gobby (2020) have argued for a better balance between Glatter's (2013:n.p.) concept of 'upward, lateral and downward accountability', within education, together with a 'bottom-up' approach to governance, which would lead to a more inclusive and participative 'stakeholder model' of governance (Wilkins, 2013:n.p.). Applied to the MATs, this could problematise the concept of 'macro' and 'micro' actors (Callon and Latour, 1981), acknowledge the contribution of local school leaders, governors, parents and community members, and as Wilkins (2013:n.p.) notes, would be a sign of their 'specialist and civic knowledge' being valued. It would also place all

participants as 'active, autonomous agents' (Newman, 2005:123), and show a clear pathway to raise concerns and provide a forum for reasonable debate. The next section discusses how such debate and meaningful dialogue was conceived to be facilitated within the centralised management and governance systems.

5.3.2 In a trend towards centralised decision-making, making a space for 'fruitful dialogue'

The data showed that where academy leaders and governors were party to discussions with the trust board and/or the CEO about decisions affecting their academy, this tended to be linked to two factors: where the MAT had grown slowly from the original school, with senior school staff and governors being known to the CEO and sometimes trustees (as ex-governors); or the seniority of the academy leader, and the roles and respect they had held in previous education positions. In both cases, this was an example of the CEOs having positive expectations about the 'intents and behaviours' of the individuals in their organisation, 'based on roles, relationships and interdependencies' (Carless, 2009:79), and as such, contributed to what Carless defined as 'organisational trust', a key ingredient for signalling responsible accountability within the MAT. For academies where such expectations were absent, building a space for dialogue and trust was more challenging, but equally important.

Hooge et al (2012:13) emphasise the importance of organisations building in the capacity to effectively engage in the processes of accountability with all relevant members, through 'fruitful dialogue'. Whilst this study has shown there to be more of a distance than 'fruitful dialogue' between the LGB/LAB and the central MAT, and between academy leaders in junior positions and the MAT, there was one example of a MAT engaging its first joining school in dialogue about the future direction of working and policy.

Hazeldene made the decision to engage fully with its first school's senior leadership team (the head had left), to develop a future vision for its academies. For MATs at the beginning of their journey, this willingness to engage with multiple levels of involvement (Popp et al 2015) displayed an understanding that compromise and negotiation were necessary prerequisites for a functioning networked organisation. Ehren and Perryman (2018), in their study of network accountability and evaluation, identified in Chapter 2, advocated accountability frameworks which had a focus on developing a deep

understanding of what the network is accomplishing, rather than merely the metrics of performance indicators. The evidence in this study has shown that in MATs where senior academy leaders were involved in the growth plan for the MAT it signalled recognition by the MAT of the importance of its academies having that understanding of the ethos and philosophy of the MAT from the start, and how that could be enacted at academy level. As Hazeldene showed, it was an example of the MAT recognising the benefit of lessening their tight control, of allowing the relaxation in the layers of authority, and thus encouraging the flow of expertise between different stakeholders for the greater good of the whole organisation (e.g., Newman and Clarke, 2009): a case of making space for 'fruitful dialogue'. It also aligns with Parsons' (2004:52) view that good policy-making in complex situations involves 'letting go, fostering innovation, creativity and diversity', and for this, the MAT management needed to feel confident that opening up debate with a joining school would benefit, rather than destabilise the organisation. Crucially, on a human level, as noted in the discussion on policy enactment in Chapter 3, it involved the central MAT team understanding that their policy changes would move many individuals from policy agents to policy subjects (Ball, 1993), and being sensitive to this.

5.3.3 Lack of transparency over lines of accountability, roles and responsibilities

For several of the research sites in this study, roles and responsibilities were still being worked out even as the MAT was in place, and new MATs felt under pressure to set up the board quickly. As with governance, the accountability model should be transparent for all involved (e.g., Clarke, 2009), and embody 'trustworthiness' (Bovens, 2007:448). However, because of the lack of transparency over policy and role change at some MATs, accountability was experienced as 'diffuse and ambiguous', leading to confusion, as noted by Ehren and Perryman, (2018:948) in their research on accountability in school networks. In this study, this was more likely to occur where there were several layers of leadership (for example, an executive principal over several schools, each with their own principal or head-of-school), or where changes in accountability had not been communicated well. If the MATs were to be regarded as a network of partners, albeit with asymmetric powers, then it would be reasonable to assume that open and transparent compromise and negotiation went 'hand in hand' with such a partnership, where partners were seeking to find the most effective ways to share decision-making,

authority and risks (Mayne, 2003). Though as one CEO pointed out (Pastures New), there were contractual obligations between the MAT and its academies, which did not exist in collaborative networks or looser partnerships, resulting in the hierarchical governance and accountability structures, especially at the beginning. As Ehren and Perryman (2018) observed in their work, the evidence in this study has identified how the creation of these MATs has complicated how such organisations were held to account. For the schools joining the MAT, the major structural changes which they subsequently experienced had led many in these organisations to question who was accountable to whom and for what.

Where transparency was lacking, it was perhaps legitimate for staff and governors to pose questions, to seek understanding around the new lines of accountability, with its shift in power from the local to the central, and to be kept 'in the loop'. Yet there was a reluctance in doing this, especially amongst junior members of staff and parents, as some didn't 'have a clue' of the role of the trust board (support staff, Hazeldene), and feared 'vested interests' of the management would lead to a lack of impartiality (parent, Hazeldene). Considered through the Foucauldian lens of power (e.g., Foucault, 1986), the MAT staff were exerting their power and position over their academy staff and the local community, including parents, through policy-making, which did not include these groups. As policy subjects, they were likely to feel some discomfiture in posing questions of clarification. Ball reminds us that when policy is framed as discourse, those in power usually decide 'who can speak' and when (Ball, 1993:14). The implications for many participants in this study was that they felt they no longer possessed the authority to speak, to challenge or engage with the MAT management and trustees, as they would have done when the pinnacle of authority was the headteacher and the chair of the LGB, 'because [trustees] are not part of our lives' (support staff, Hazeldene).

5.4 Summary of Chapter 5

This chapter has examined issues implicit to RQ1: the type of governance and accountability structures put in place by the MATs in the study, and an interpretation of what this meant to the people involved in the organisations, at a range of levels and roles, and what the practical implications have been. Newman and Clarke's (2009) typology of governance was applied to the systems adopted by these sites, showing that they appeared to be working as heterarchies (Ball, 2009), in that elements of all four aspects of

governance – hierarchical, managerial, self-governance and network - were evident. However, with strong control being exerted from the centre, two aspects of governance were dominant: hierarchical, as indicated by the two-tier level of governance adopted by each of the MATs, leaving local governors with considerably less power and authority, and accountable to the trust board; and managerial, as indicated by the emphasis on results and Ofsted grades. The implications for individuals, particularly local governors, has been a feeling of diminishment of their previously-acknowledged role: the powerful responsibilities they once held, with regards to decision-making and holding the headteacher to account, had been assumed by the trust board. For the MAT's part, the aim was to have consistency in governance, management and standards across the organisation, and having a centralised system enabled this.

This centralised structure of governance was reflected in the lines of accountability within the MATs. Overall, MATs were using a vertical system of accountability (Hooge et al, 2012), with upward, rather than downward or lateral accountability being the norm. Policy was made at MAT and trust-board level, with trustees and MAT staff being the policy actors or instigators, and school leaders and local governors being the enactors and subjects of those policies, who were answerable to the board with regards to local implementation of policy, academic achievements and progress in their school. The shift in this policy positioning for many local stakeholders had not always been communicated well and had led to the feeling of insignificance and confusion of their new role in the organisation. However, more encouragingly, amongst academy staff, there was evidence of inter-academy lateral or horizontal accountability, with CEOs fostering professionalism between schools, with the emergence of 'professional learning communities' (Hooge et al, 2012). Despite this, the complex and sometimes opaque governance and accountability systems put in place by these MATs led to a key question for many stakeholders: 'who was accountable to whom and for what?' (e.g., Ehren and Perryman, 2018).

These new structures, whilst bringing a level of coherence and consistency across the organisation, had had the consequence (intended or otherwise) of reducing the opportunity for lay-participation. The models adopted did not encourage Wilkins' (2013) desired model of more inclusive and participative stakeholder governance. Local

governors and parents in particular, did not feel that their contributions were of value, and as a consequence, resulted in some of them withdrawing from, or not putting themselves forward for participation, which some feared was an indicator of a democratic deficit of local representation. The mainly upward lines of accountability adopted by the MATs impeded a forum for meaningful discourse across the tiers of management and governance and reduced the potential for negotiation amongst those with varying levels of power: local figures felt they had become 'observers' of the machinations of governance, rather than activators.

Chapter 6 will take up these themes in its examination of RQ2, in the marginalisation of local agency and voice, and the implications for professional autonomy and agency.

CHAPTER 6: RQ2: THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURES FOR THOSE IN POSITIONS OF LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE, IN TERMS OF AUTONOMY AND AGENCY

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 concluded that the systems of governance and lines of accountability adopted by these MATs had facilitated some level of coherence and consistency across the organisations, but often at the cost of lay participation, with governors and parents in particular feeling side-lined in the business of governance. For academy leads, the MAT system had, to some extent, helped foster professionalism and communication between schools, although the somewhat opaque lines of accountability had led to confusion over who held them to account. Chapter 6 presents a discussion of the data analysis in relation to RQ2, examining the implications of these new systems of governance and accountability on the autonomy and agency of these key local figures in the MAT – local governors, academy leaders and parents. It is divided into two sections. Section 6.2 will focus on the implications for governors and parents; Section 6.3 will focus on the implications for academy senior leaders.

6.2 Marginalisation of the local voice in governance: implications for autonomy and agency

Section 6.2.1 begins with a discussion of how the reduced role for local governors had led to many local authority (LA)-elected governors withdrawing from local governance, calling into question local democratic representation on the LGB/LAB. Section 6.2.2 examines the implications of this withdrawal of many local figures, along with the ‘deficit of understanding’ amongst centrally-appointed trust boards whose members were not ‘steeped’ in the local issues and knowledge of their academies. Section 6.2.3 expands on a theme identified in Chapter 5, studying the implications of local governors being in a hybrid place of having responsibility with few decision-making powers, with their role largely one of a ‘rubber-stamp’.

6.2.1 Reduction in local democratic representation

Data analysis has shown a near-absence of LA representation on LGBs/LABs, resulting in no democratically-elected representation from the borough in which the academy was situated. Several reasons were identified by current governors for this situation (Chapter 4, section 4.3.1), and some of which were referred to in Chapter 5 (section 5.2.2). First, a veiled discouragement from the MAT's trust board: there were suggestions that this was a demonstration of MATs establishing their autonomy and displaying independence from the 'small state' of local government, setting themselves free from its 'shackles of bureaucracy' (Osborne, 2016:n.p.). Second, that the local councillors were not interested in being on a governing body when they had little agency or power to influence and effect change. Third, with a MAT based outside the councillors' borough, being on the LGB would not necessarily add to their professional identity and standing in the community, a key reason for some councillors opting to be a school governor. Finally, with the national policy of ideological distancing between schools and LAs, the role of local governor for a councillor would have little relevance. Glatter (2013:n.p.) stated that with the removal of 'that strong mediating layer' of the LA, which, by definition, is local, there was a danger of a 'crisis of legitimacy', along with a democratic deficit. If this were to be the case, and if the voices of locally-elected LA councillors were not replaced by other elected members of the local community, then it would only add to the concerns regarding the legitimacy of the MAT (discussed in Chapter 7). This study has found that local governors welcomed the contribution that LA governors made to the LGB. They brought local education knowledge and expertise, with an understanding tailored to the needs and idiosyncrasies of the immediate geographical area of the academy, and of the borough in general ('[LA governors] were in the field of education and social policy', governor, Chalkdown). They also typically knew and lived in their local community. In minority ethnic areas, this was considered significant in helping to understand the specific needs of the population, particularly where academy staff and/or trustees were predominantly White British, which was typical of most of the research sites. As a result, one LAB felt that 'we've become less representative [of our local community]' (local governor, Chalkdown). LA governors were also perceived as being prepared to invest their time long-term to the LGB: 'when you set out on a journey you want to see it through' (local governor, Chalkdown). However, research by Radnor and Ball (1995:3) showed that the inclusion of

LA governors on the LGB had not always been welcome, with their impact on school policies and management being regarded as 'limited and indirect', whilst at the same time, headteachers not welcoming voices which could introduce a note of discordance, which is how LA governors were sometimes characterised. However, for the remaining governors in this study, this exit of locally-known, locally-informed and respected, elected individuals – the '*movers and shakers*' according to one governor at Chalkdown - was seen as a loss, one which they felt they themselves could not compensate for, nor could the trust board with their remoteness to issues pertinent to individual academies.

In their discussion of the displacement of locally elected representatives, Gunter and McGinty (2014:310) argue for democratic renewal in education, but that this required 'a pluralism of ideas and positions that is not currently tolerated'. Glatter (2013:n.p.) identifies the negative compounding effects of a democratic deficit with a 'paucity of pluralism' amongst those taking decisions. He argues for greater dispersal of power and control in education, and to invoke the 'principle of subsidiarity', drawing on Marquand's (2004:143) belief that decisions on public policy should always be taken 'at the lowest practicable level of government', which in this case, would be LGBs/LABs. Chapter 7 discusses the implications for legitimacy of a lack of pluralism in the make-up of trust boards and LGBs: the absence of democratically elected councillors is a further contributing factor to this lack of pluralism. Tinker (2015:20-21) suggests that local democracy within education has been 'treated as a marginal consideration', when it should be considered fundamental. He suggests that technocratic expertise, so valued by the MATs in this study, should not be the sole driving force in school support and accountability, but that schools needed a relationship with the 'voice of their communities', as well as with local democratic politics. Indeed, reasoned argument, deliberation and reflection with the community has often been seen as an indicator of democracy (e.g., Seward, 2005). Yet the evidence in this study has indicated that the connection with the local community, advocated by Seward, was based on an informal arrangement, outside of the realm of structured governance procedures, with no clear pathway to locally elected representatives, who could take forward concerns and issues to the LA. What these LGBs/LABs appeared to lack, was what Apple et al (2018:4-5) termed a 'thick understanding of democracy', which sought to provide 'full, collective

participation in the search for the common good and the creation of critical citizens'. The resulting deficit of local knowledge and understanding is discussed below.

6.2.2 A deficit of local knowledge and understanding

This virtual absence of LA figures and councillors on the local governing bodies and trust boards has identified a deficit of local knowledge and understanding within governance. This section will look at the implications of this from a number of angles: the knowledge of the trustees, in relation to their schools' needs, backgrounds and communities; moves to address the potential deficit in local knowledge; and the impact of the side-lining of the parent voice, as a local source of knowledge.

6.2.2.1 Trustees not being 'steeped' in their academies

This reduction of local community figures who had a good knowledge and understanding of the school population and neighbourhood was conflated with a situation where trustees were often more distant, both geographically, and also less knowledgeable about individual academies because of their centralised role. Analysis has identified real concern amongst local governors and even trustees themselves, that there was a '*deficit of knowledge*' amongst the trust board, who were not '*steeped*' in the school ethos (LGB Chair, Hazeldene). This was in two areas. First, a lack of knowledge and understanding of the context, needs and priorities of individual academies, resulting in what Hazeldene's LGB Chair termed a '*deficit of understanding*'; and second, a lack of local educational expertise - knowing the educational history and priorities of an area, which the LA governors had been seen to have provided previously. In cases where trustees had had a close history with the founding school (such as through being an ex-governor) the trustees were familiar with both the school and its community. However, once schools outside the neighbourhood joined the MAT, there was a noticeable lack of knowledge on the trust boards' part, with an awareness amongst trustees of their own shortcomings: '*It's a bit of a weakness in my knowledge [about the new school] and it's something I need to improve on*', (trustee, Pastures New). This indicated a deficit amongst trustees, and not exclusively in the larger MATs, of what Hooge et al (2012:15) recognised as 'beliefs, experiences, and practices in schools' in which accountability processes were 'nested'. Where there was fragility in the foundations upon which accountability processes were based, such as lack of clarity or understanding over roles and responsibilities, and lack of

authentic knowledge and experience, this questioned the legitimate basis of the MAT. Whilst there was no evidence that trust boards lacked a *belief* in their academies, without practical experience and knowledge of the history of each academy and its community – for example, their pathways through difficulties and successes – there was a feeling amongst a range of participants that this placed the MAT at a disadvantage, with less capability to respond quickly to local concerns, and again pointed to a concern for the lack of legitimacy of the MAT (e.g., Glatter, 2011).

Ehren et al (2017) stress the importance of members of education networks responding quickly to local problems, and to ‘professionally scrutinize and share local solutions’ (Ehren and Perryman, 2018:956). However, the evidence in this study presents an uneven picture. Some trust boards felt confident in their role as scrutineer of local issues, especially for their academies which shared the same demographics as the original academy; but they were less confident in their dealings with new schools with a less familiar profile, which one trustee admitted, above. Local governors, whose previous role included scrutineer of local problems and solutions, were unsettled by the MAT staff and trustees assuming this responsibility, with their inexperience of the school community. It is possible that in the future, once individual academies had shown they had the ‘capacity, the expertise and the maturity’ to be responsible with autonomy, (Ehren et al, 2017:n.p.), the MAT would concede more local accountability to the local governance level, and thus address the ‘dilution of local empowerment’ warned of by Glatter (2011:167) in his critique of the emergence of ‘academy chains’ (MATs). Whilst Ehren et al (2017) were referring particularly to decentralisation of inspections, the theme of academies being trusted with responsibility and autonomy is relevant to this study. It has implications for leadership agency and the negotiations of new roles and responsibilities, which are fundamentally based on trust and confidence, themes which are examined in Section 6.3 in relation to the autonomy and agency of school leaders.

There were, however, signs that self-awareness of this deficit of local understanding was causing some MATs to address the issue. For example, one trust had created ‘link trustees’ between certain academies (Chalkdown); small focus groups on the trust board with specific areas of expertise had been set up (Hazeldene); and appointing a local governor from one of their Outstanding or Good academies on to the trust board

(Pastures New). There was some support for trustees attending LGB meetings to enable them to get to know the children, and for LGB/LAB members attending trust board meetings to help them to understand the business side of the organisation, subject to them displaying '*competence*' in their governor role, according to one trustee (Pastures New), although this was not defined. A potential danger here was that '*competence*' could be framed by the values and modes enshrined in entrepreneurship and competitiveness, which were then legitimised and given moral authority (Ball and Junemann, 2012), and could signal to potential governors that their lay and tacit skills were not valued. Analysis has shown that such individuals, through their lack of professional skills, felt '*side-lined in the business of governance*' (Clarke, 2009:38), and the next section will examine the implication for parents.

6.2.2.2 A side-lining of parental voice and tacit skills

The study found that parents were becoming less sure of their role in their involvement in either the academy or the MAT: some believed they no longer had the required skills to be a local governor, despite their intimate knowledge of the school and the community, as the business-oriented skills that the MAT was requiring would exclude them: '*I can't actually think of any skills [I have] [...] I think it would exclude a lot of parents,*' (parent, Hazeldene). This was somewhat ironic, given the new limited role and powers of the local governor, but it was a sign that not all parents were aware of the changes in governance, with key powers previously held by the LGB now in the hands of the MAT. Those who were aware of the implications of the changes in accountability were mystified by the process involved if they needed to make a complaint against the school, given the decisions were now made at MAT-level, not the LA, and expressed their concerns in terms of having to '*fight the business*' (parent, Hazeldene) with the MAT's perceived lack of impartiality due to its new business focus: resulting in a further example of Glatter's (2011:167) '*dilution of local empowerment*'.

These experiences pointed to a disturbing sense of local voices and views not being listened to, or even valued. The evidence confirmed that parents were keen to hold some agency in their child's education: many wanted their '*say*' with other stakeholders but were unsure of the process, or indeed if they would be welcomed. A better understanding of the new systems of governance might have addressed the risk of parent

self-withdrawal from the system (e.g., Tinker, 2015). The situation certainly brings into question the government's affirmation that an education system independent of the LA would 'empower parents and communities' (DfE, 2016a: 53). It also confirms the concerns expressed by the Education Select Committee, set up in 2017 to investigate the balance of decision-making at school and MAT level, which concluded that there was too much emphasis on 'upward accountability and not enough on local engagement' (House of Commons, 2017:para. 46), reflecting the experiences of not only parents, but staff and local governors in this study. With the addition of the central MAT governance, parents were left confused about who to approach with any problems or queries: it was through the research process that such views and experiences were given the platform to be heard. This should give me, as researcher, cause to reflect on my responsibility towards the participants, and whether through listening to their experiences I had become part of those, and should have been more agentic in my role, stepping off the 'balcony' (e.g., Apple, 2013; 2014; Rowley, 2014:52) to engage with participants' concerns. This is an important element to phenomenological research, and I expand on this theme in relation to how I conducted the research in Chapter 8.

The experiences of these parents also signified a side-lining of the 'practical knowledge and knowing of children, parents and professionals' (Gunter and McGinty, 2014:309) with its propensity to be 'messy and incoherent', in favour of a more streamlined centralised management and governance system. It also signalled that 'local idiosyncrasies, priorities and interests' were in danger of being 'overridden by policies which are seen to come from outside' (Buckles, 2010:7). As several participants noted, a move towards a better balance of central and local voices would be welcomed by members of the local community, not only because local players brought local knowledge, but also to 'balance the increasing emphasis on the professional skills in finance and management' (Glatter, 2017:122) clearly valued by the MAT governance and management. Without such a move towards a more even balance of voices, and with a lack of a clear arena within which to discuss local concerns, there was a danger of a silencing of those voices which may have known best on local issues, or at least would have had something to contribute. As a result, the data supported Glatter's (2017:122) observation that the MAT system had a tendency to regard parents and children as 'consumers', with 'limited rights and scope for

influence', and downgraded the role of local values (e.g., Ball and Junemann, 2012). If parents and other members of the local community (including governors) believed their values were not being acknowledged by the trust board, then universal commitment to the MAT 'project' risked being undermined. This does not appear to have been the subject of previous research into MATs or academisation, and points to an area where further research would be fruitful. The next section explores this diminishing and sidelining of the local voice, in relation to the views of local governors, who, despite their distancing from key decision-making, were still accountable for their individual academies.

6.2.3 In a hybrid place: governors being held to account with diminished powers of control

In an environment of uncertainty and opacity over roles and accountabilities, identified in Chapter 5, it was perhaps unsurprising that local governors felt in a hybrid zone: with diminished powers and agency they were unsure who they were holding to account, and how they would be able to do so with any efficacy. Most were aware that their role, and therefore them, as individuals, had become less significant in terms of their influence, reduced to a '*rubber stamp*', according to a Chalkdown governor. It is useful here to draw on Ehren and Perryman's (2018) examination of accountability within school networks and the impact of centralised governance on individual decision-making and agency. They expressed concerns over the unease that school management felt in being accountable for things they had little control over. This study has contributed to that debate by identifying a similar concern amongst local governors. The local governors in this study recognised that their lack of control over many of the facets of governance for which they had been previously responsible had removed the LGB's autonomous positioning, and reduced their role to one of '*observers*' (community governor, Chalkdown), a situation which was either driving many local governors away, as shown in section 6.2.1., or making them dissatisfied in their role.

Comparing these findings to the work on education governance of Clarke (2009) and Wilkins (2015), Clarke argued that increasingly, governors who possessed lay or tacit knowledge may find themselves marginalised in the 'business of governance' (Clarke, 2009:38), as a preference was developing for a display of 'hard' skills of business, such as

finance, law and management experience. Similarly, Wilkins (2015:195) identified a tendency in school governance towards a 'risk-prepared, professionalized culture', with technical expertise or specialist knowledge being sought. However, the picture here is not that straightforward, as noted in the discussion about parental involvement. On the one hand, MATs said they were seeking local governors with lay and tacit knowledge, who may have had some knowledge of the local community; yet individuals with such skills were excluding themselves from governance because they did not feel those skills were valued by the MAT, as opposed to more professional 'hard' skills. On the other hand, many of the local governors in this study *did* possess 'hard', professional skills, which CEOs said they appreciated; yet despite having these skills, and with seemingly much to contribute to the running of the academy, they were being side-lined and marginalised into the role of non-agentic observers. This paradox was at the core of the feeling governors had of being in a liminal zone: they had the skills and experience but were not required to use them with any real degree of authority.

Contributing to this sense of displacement for local governors, many academy leaders welcomed the decrease in governor responsibility, as they felt it enabled local governors to focus on school matters, leaving major policy decisions to the trust board and MAT management. This narrative supported a space for the rationalisation of the reduction in local powers and shift in governor accountability, where local governors, as '*volunteers*', were not qualified to be tasked with '*massive responsibilities and decisions*' (Executive Principal, Chalkdown): these were now for the trust board. It could also signify an attempt on the part of school leaders to reclaim some of the autonomy they had lost as a headteacher since joining the MAT. As Stevenson (2019) notes in his essay on the role for leadership in a 'school-led' system, school leaders working within the MAT had more limited scope for key school-level decision-making. One interpretation of the analysis from this study could be that if academy leaders were not experiencing the promised autonomy for their school or themselves, then they could at least try to be autonomous from their LGB. Perhaps being accountable to one seat of governance (the trust board) was enough for them.

According to some academy leaders, certain governors were labouring under a '*misunderstanding*' of the changes to their remit, without the realisation that '*they are all*

diminished' (Executive Principal, Chalkdown). To address this 'misunderstanding', some MATs had put in a programme of what they termed 're-education' for governors. However, this itself was problematic, given that for many years, headteachers had been training governors to be true challengers and inquisitors of the data and of teaching and leadership in the school. Now, governors were being told that this was the MAT's role, which for many governors, was a regrettable move away from strategic decision-making. Framing this within Newman and Clarke's (2009:128) models of governance, this appeared to be an example of the MATs using hierarchical governance wherein the governors had been re-cast from the role of autonomous policy actors to 'political subjects' of the MAT. The study found little evidence of the governors feeling they were 'empowered, reflexive subjects', as would have been the case in a self-empowered governance regime, or working within any coordinated, 'mutual adjustment' with members of the MAT, as indications of network governance (Newman and Clarke, 2009:128), and was exacerbated by many parents not realising the new, diminished status of their local governors: *'[parents] don't understand the powers that we've lost; they don't understand what we were and what we've become,'*(community governor/parent, Chalkdown).

Section 6.3 will examine the data in relation to the impact on the autonomy and agency of academy senior leaders.

6.3 Autonomy and agency: implications for school leaders, and the importance of mutually trusting relationships

Chapter 4 (section 4.4.2) showed how the new structures of the MATs had, for many senior academy staff, facilitated the development of positive intra-MAT relationship, and how this had contributed to building trust amongst academy leaders, and with their CEOs. Having a shared understanding of each other's schools, their student populations and communities was an indicator of a cohesive way of working. Autonomy and agency are the themes underpinning RQ2, and the role of trusting relationships between the CEO and MAT leadership, and their new academy leaders is framed within this context. Section 6.3.1 discusses the importance of the MAT appreciating the policy context within which new schools were joining them, and of the need to carefully 'build a bridge' between joining staff and the MAT leadership. Section 6.3.2 presents an analysis of how

school leaders balanced the reduction in professional autonomy and control brought by centralised MAT structures, with the 'crew of safety' and support offered by the MAT. Section 6.3.3 focuses on the theme of 'earned autonomy', its conceptualisation amongst CEOs, its understanding by senior leaders and implications for their practice. The vulnerability of CEOs caused by the need to make decisions on the autonomy and responsibilities of their staff is also discussed.

6.3.1 'Building a bridge': fostering trust and goodwill

When schools joined an existing MAT, some were entering a relationship with familiar colleagues, with a history or collaboration, and with concomitant expectations, maybe bringing significant resources for the MAT to deploy (e.g., Colebatch, 2014). However, others, possibly unwillingly, were entering an unknown environment, other than an awareness of some of the MAT's more publicly-known 'contextual dimensions' (Braun et al, 2011), such as its history and reputation. '*Building a bridge*' with joining schools (Hazeldene LGB Chair), had implications for school leaders in terms of their autonomy and agency. Whatever the previous levels of familiarity with the MAT, each of these schools would be entering into a 'continuing [policy] discourse' and would be required to gain the cooperation of the 'established interests' (Colebatch, 2014:355) of the MAT management and governance, and this required sensitive relationship-building.

Each trust board in this study was keenly aware of the precariousness of a system which depended on the goodwill and compliance of joining school leaders, in order for the MAT to be successful. Trustees were acutely conscious that if academy leads did not adhere to and adopt the missions and visions of the MAT, effectively becoming policy subjects, then the MAT itself had no role: '*If the MAT has an idea of what missions and visions should be, and the schools don't take that, then the MAT has no role*' (Trust Chair, Chalkdown). Thus, the MAT needed to 'orientate the whole workforce to shared, institutional outcomes' (Tinker, 2015:12), a situation reliant on mutual trust, as 'glue to fill the gaps' (Puranam and Vanneste, 2009:24) amongst any uncertainty in, or lack of commitment to the MAT's mission. Gibson (2016:47), in his critique of the autonomy of academy principals, describes their role as one of 'conduit for the sponsor's message' where they are instructed to lead and manage change which has been set by the sponsor. In his discussion on the role of school leadership within a centrally-controlled system,

Stevenson (2019:223) identifies the dichotomy of the school leader whose role is both to 'personify the new autonomy' whilst simultaneously being a 'key enforcer' of the centralised education system. This was the paradoxical position in which school leaders in this study found themselves, where they were flag-bearers or 'conduits' for the MAT, yet professionally, had less autonomy and control over their own school.

These changes to professional control and autonomy would have been easier to accept if communication from the MAT had been better: that sense of staff not being kept '*in the loop*' (support staff, Hazeldene) identified disappointment with how the new management had dealt with and communicated the changes. For a school considering joining or being required to join a MAT, the benefits of collaboration might be unclear and difficult to estimate beforehand (Ehren and Perryman, 2018), and an externally-imposed regime of accountability could present dilemmas over reduced professional autonomy, as well as introducing significant risks. Where schools had been given the opportunity to talk to the MAT and question staff in its other academies, prior to their final decision to join the MAT, as with Heron Trust, this had resulted in smooth transition and an allaying of fears: '*We had a kind of speed –dating [...] "have a wander round and talk to people, ask them about the Trust." I think that helped them [...] it was a really, really smooth transition,*' (Principal, Heron Trust). Viewed through the lens of policy enactment theory, when academy leaders had been part of such a discussion process their role was more agentic, taking control of the policy discourse, or at least playing an active part (e.g., Ball, 1993). This was an important move, as several of the school leaders in the study had previously been autonomous heads of their own school, but now had either a CEO or executive principal above them. Greany and Ehren (2016:n.p.) identified the cultural challenges faced by school leaders 'used to running their own ship', having to adhere and work within the framework set by the central MAT, and they noted that tensions needed to be resolved for the partnership to be effective. The next section examines how far executive and school leaders were prepared to accept the trade-off of lessened autonomy in exchange for extra support provided by the MAT structure.

6.3.2 Balancing the lessening of control and agency for the 'crew of safety' and collegiality provided by the MAT

The centralised structure and the subsequent loss of autonomy for academy leaders was justified by trustees as the MAT '*removing the hassle factor*' of dealing with finance and recruitment, leaving academy leaders (and local governors) to deal with '*what really motivates headteachers – teaching and learning*' (both quotes, Trust Chair, Hazeldene). In the early stages of a take-over, the relationship between the MAT management and an academy leader tended to be more didactic and directive, but once improvement was evident, a more negotiated relationship developed, with greater responsibility being given. Regarded through a Foucauldian lens of power (Foucault, 1986), this fairly turbulent period of developing new policies and transitioning to unfamiliar ways of working, necessitated the MAT senior management as policy-makers to exert their positions and power over their staff, as policy subjects. This study has identified that where the MAT presented a clear rationale and justification for the exertion of their power through policy implementation, and where staff saw that the benefits of such policy outweighed the curtailment of their autonomy, academy leaders were more likely to accept their position as policy subjects. Despite having '*sailed [their] own ship for so long*' as ex-head teachers, there was acknowledgement that the MAT had driven the schools '*much faster and much further*' than they could have done as an autonomous school outside of the MAT (both quotes from Executive Principal, Chalkdown).

This acknowledgment of the benefit of the extra layer of support provided by the MAT, described by an ex-sponsor of Chalkdown as '*wrap-around support*' and a '*crew of safety*', was also valued by more junior leaders. Having an executive principal above heads-of-schools or principals contributed to the sense of not being alone in making big decisions and dealing with problems, and again, made up for the lessening of control and autonomy in their leadership role. Thus, whilst there was recognition by academy leaders that control of their long-held principles and practices were at times being challenged by policy changes or new expectations for standards (Crow et al, 2017) dictated by the MAT, it was deemed worth it for the benefits brought by being part of a bigger, more experienced, educational organisation. Findings indicated that any potential or actual loss of a school leaders' sense of agency and autonomy was at least partly recovered through discussion and negotiation between themselves and the leader above them, whether that

was the CEO or executive principal. As the relationship developed, there was a greater understanding of each other's needs and priorities, and a willingness on both sides to negotiate and compromise, in a spirit of '*mutual agreement*' (Executive Principal, Chalkdown).

In addition to the 'wrap-around support' provided by the MAT, analysis identified a new collegiality amongst academy leaders, facilitated by being in the MAT, especially amongst those in neighbouring academies, with the same pupil demographics, local issues and challenges. Working closely together with peers to find common solutions reduced the sense of isolation that the role of headteacher could sometimes bring, without fear of '*being judged in your capacity as head*' as a Heron Trust principal described the LA system. Having an empathetic colleague of the same status also seemed to provide an emotional 'prop' in stressful situations. Klijn et al (2010), in their review of the literature on trust and governance, posit that trust stimulates learning and the exchange of information and knowledge. They argue that if knowledge is regarded as partly tacit and comes in the form of human capital (Nooteboom, 1998), then this type of knowledge can only be acquired 'through exchange and intensive cooperation' (Klijn et al, 2010:197), where actors are keen to learn from each other. Describing this as a 'horizontal coordinating mechanism', Klijn et al (2010:198) regard this as more likely to produce innovation and new insights, than a more vertical structure. Academy leaders and principals in this study, particularly from primary schools with either a shared history or shared demographics, as indicated above, where they could, in their words, '*share stories about families who live on the estate*' (HoS, Chalkdown), were demonstrably involved in cooperative knowledge exchange, and felt that their close relationship and common understandings benefited their ability to be a good school leader. Reliability contributed to the trusting relationship that had grown between them: because they knew each other well and could build on a 'previous familiarity or pre-acquaintanceship' (Gurwitsch, 1962:53), these academy leaders could rely on each other to do 'what was expected', in a regular and consistent manner (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015:263), and were fulfilling role expectations (Schutz, 1967b). Using the framework of Schutz's (in Gurwitsch, 1962:57) 'stock of knowledge at hand', this made it easier to assimilate new forms of practice and expectations, associated with their new roles and responsibilities, and those

of their colleagues, despite the likelihood of it bringing a lessening of professional autonomy. These positive implications for academy leaders identified in the study, provided a welcome antidote to many of the documented negative impacts of academisation and the growth of MATs, and were indicative of the fine balancing act for these leaders when judging whether or not the advantages outweighed the constrictions. This professional collaboration could be an example of Hooge et al's (2012:9) 'professional learning communities', which is based on management trusting staff with a degree of autonomy. For academy leaders in this study, when they and their managers came to an agreement in their views about each other's responsibilities, a match in assumed values was reached, and thus the basis of trust was strengthened, a concept described by Bryk and Schneider (2002:16-17) as 'relational trust'. In these situations, autonomy was a product of the degree of confidence and trust a leader felt in their staff, and how a new leader was seen to perform and handle new responsibilities. Where such trust was lacking, this was identified as a problematic issue, leading to the concept and practice of 'earned autonomy', examined in the following section.

6.3.3 The requirement to demonstrate responsibility with autonomy

Data showed that the CEOs and trust boards were balancing two potentially opposing forces. On one side, there was the centralisation and top-down messaging in order to maintain the key mission of the MAT including best practice in teaching. On the other side, there was the bestowal of autonomy to individual academies demonstrating good management and governance. The more an academy was able to show responsibility with self-management, the less the impact of some of the negative factors of centralisation. Where a school management team and governance were doing well, there was little appetite on the part of the trust, to make big changes: *'If I bring an Outstanding school into the trust, why would I tell them how to run their school? I'm not arrogant'* (CEO, Pastures New); *'If a school came along and who are doing fine, they're not going to suddenly say "oh you can do everything for us", and I wouldn't necessarily want to'* (CEO, Hazeldene). In such circumstances, the CEOs of the newest MATs in particular, welcomed the involvement of academy leaders and senior staff from joining schools in policy-making, and making new appointments. This was seen as allowing senior leaders to take ownership of the new systems and structures and disseminate the key messages

throughout their academy. It was also regarded as a move to empower senior staff to make *'the right decisions'* (trustee, Pastures New), based on the values and mission of the MAT, and within a supportive culture through *'the bridge of trust'* (trustee, Hazeldene). This approach aligned with Cerna's (2014) findings of a study in Ontario, where a school improvement model was implemented, based on centralised accountability with school-level control. In that study, to build a sense of shared understanding amongst various stakeholders, teachers were included in negotiations and discussions on the reform agenda. Hammersley-Fletcher et al (2018:603) in their study of agonistic democracy amongst teacher-leaders noted how the 'power of participation', 'championed by enthusiasts', in the form of teachers-as-researchers, had a dramatic difference on practices and identities. This openness displayed by a MAT, with information and a willingness to be more inclusive in decision-making, was likely to foster mutual trust identified in research by Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015). Although their research, and that of Hammersley-Fletcher et al (2018) was primarily with teachers, applying the concept to this study, it was a sign that those in the MAT leadership recognised the 'valuable professional knowledge', and 'collective wisdom' (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015:271) of staff from the joining schools, which could be harnessed for the benefit of the whole MAT. It was also an indication of an attempt to develop a shared narrative amongst variously-positioned stakeholders, in order to operate collectively (Colebatch, 2014), and an example of tolerating Hecló's concept of 'collective puzzling' (Colebatch, 2014:351). However, Colebatch (2014:350-351) does deliver a warning that 'shared understandings' do not always equate to individuals making sense of the issues in the same way, a situation which was sometimes identified when teaching staff had a very different perception of the MAT to senior leaders, with them typically having a more cautious and slightly suspicious view of the MAT as a remote business.

However, this openness to involve school leaders in MAT-wide decision-making, was not universal, and tended to reflect the degree of trust the CEO had in the leadership or governance of a joining school. Autonomy was reduced or removed from an academy leader not showing responsibility with power, until a time when they could, to guard against making the whole MAT vulnerable: on one occasion, to motivate greater responsibility with autonomy, an academy's contribution to central funds was increased.

This motivational concept of academy/school leaders working hard to gain autonomy under sometimes very difficult conditions, could be interpreted as 'autonomy by Ofsted grade', an example of managerial governance oriented towards outputs rather than processes (Newman and Clarke, 2009), and is relevant to Wettlaufer's (2015:39) argument that 'institutionalised shaming' is once more popular. However, Wettlaufer (2015:39) concedes that if the shaming is designed to have a positive impact, such as reminding members of the shared norms (so long as everyone agrees on these norms, which itself is a contested issue) and is done within 'small face-to-face groups, where everybody knows everybody and values are shared', then this could be beneficial. Whilst it is arguable that the arena of the MAT facilitates 'small face-to-face groups', the evidence in this study implies that within small and/or supportive MATs, and when handled sensitively by the CEO or senior leaders, then the concept could be viewed by MAT management not so much as 'shaming', but as a way of building the blocks for effective cooperation amongst the family of academies, and relies on mutual trust (e.g., Wettlaufer, 2015), as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Previous research has acknowledged that within organisations, trust takes time to develop (Cerna, 2014; Dietz and Den Hartog, 2006; Popp et al, 2013), and that to break the cycle of distrust, managers had to 'respect others before they have earned the right to be respected (Fullan, 2011:16). This is a position at odds with some of the MATs in this study: responsibility was not bestowed until it was seen to be earned consistently and was removed if there was any doubt. The efficacy of school leaders was closely and constantly monitored by the MAT (e.g., Powell, 1996), with implications for the leaders' feelings of agency. This study has revealed that from the CEOs' stance, there was too much at stake to afford leaders respect before they had earned it: *'they have to be responsible with [autonomy]... otherwise the whole place becomes totally vulnerable [...] children only get one education'* (CEO, Pastures New). Academy senior staff had to be seen as competent and responsible within their role before the MAT could risk bestowing agency and autonomy: the reputation and survival of the MAT depended on this.

From the CEO's viewpoint, constant staff monitoring and the hesitancy to give less successful school leaders responsibility could perhaps be understood in the context of the calculated risk they were taking. For the CEOs and trust boards, bestowing autonomy to a

school leader, was not without consequence, and they were aware that it was their responsibility to make unpopular or significant changes, in order not to '*pull down the whole organisation*' (Trust Chair, Hazeldene), and experienced by one CEO as '*just conflict all the way*' (Chalkdown), which could result in damaging delicate inter-personal relationships with staff. This had implications for these CEOs who were involved in a 'risk-taking act' (e.g., Bottery, 2004; Cerna, 2014; Mayer et al, 1995; Rousseau et al, 1998), when implementing change, and which put them and their trust board in a vulnerable position. With staff from joining schools, CEOs were operating within a level of 'calculative trust' (Bottery, 2003:250; Bottery, 2004:6), and made decisions about the degree of autonomy to give academy leaders based on 'positive expectations of the intentions and behaviour' of these colleagues (Rousseau et al, 1998:395). Whilst RQ2 focuses on those in positions of local leadership and governance, this study has identified the vulnerabilities for CEOs (and also trustees) caused by their positions of power within a growing organisation, from which they have had to make extraordinarily important decisions, which would have an impact on all stakeholders across the MAT. This is an important theme discussed in Chapter 7, with regards to the expectations that other MAT stakeholders had of people in the highest positions of power, succession-planning, and the implications this had for how legitimacy of the MAT was conceived.

6.4 Summary of Chapter 6

This chapter has highlighted that through the new governance and accountability structures adopted by the MATs, there has been a reduction in opportunities for local voices to be heard and to have a meaningful influence on the running of their academy, within the centralised MAT system. Once autonomous governing bodies, LGBs were now largely 'advocates' for the MAT, and there was little motivation for local councillors to be involved in a body which had reduced powers, agency and authority. This had resulted in scarce democratic representation at LA level (only parent governors were elected), evidence of Skelcher's (1998) warning of a democratic deficit. Appointed, rather than elected trustees were responsible for the 'massive' decisions across the organisation, including academy-level policy in many cases, despite concern over their lack of knowledge and understanding of education and local issues. For many individuals in the study, this shift in governance brought with it a lack of clarity in the lines of accountability

between governance and management, and the roles and purpose of local governors. The implications for governors, or 'advocates' was that they had found themselves in the hybrid position of being held responsible, and sometimes, indeed accountable, for some levels of decision-making, but without autonomous powers or authority to truly have influence over any strategic or significant decisions. With a diminished voice, governors believed they had been reduced to the role of non-agentic 'rubber-stampers'.

Most parents were unaware of this shift in governance powers from local to central and were not clear what their governing body or advocate board now stood for. Ironically, given the emasculated role of local governor, parents were reluctant to put themselves forward for involvement with local governance, for fear of not possessing what they saw as the new requisite hard business skills. Local governors, parents and members of the local community felt that since being in a MAT, they had had limited control over their own academy, and had no control or agency in the workings of the MAT. Far from being an example of the reformed education system in Ontario, noted by Hargreaves and Ainscow (2015:47), which 'generated and galvanized local creativity and energy in order to respond flexibly to local needs and circumstances', the experience of parents in this study reflected Buckles' (2010:7) warning that 'local idiosyncrasies, priorities and interests' were being 'overridden by policies which are seen to come from outside'.

For academy leaders, their MAT engaging in building and facilitating mutually trusting relationships with its staff across the organisation was most welcome and tended to form the basis for being given professional autonomy and a sense of agency. The presence of previously established relationships, with concomitant expectations of behaviour supported this building of trust (e.g., Gurwitsch, 1962), and tended to result in the development of collegiate, collaborative relationships amongst academy leads. Senior leaders were making a balanced assessment of the loss of autonomy in leadership with the advantages of the 'crew of safety' offered by belonging to a MAT. Whilst they conceded that the MAT governance and accountability structure tended to result in a lessening of agency and autonomy, these leaders welcomed the 'wrap around support' offered by the MAT, in the form of professional development and school improvement, and this countered a sense of isolation often typical of the traditional headteacher role.

Senior leaders were aware that they were being monitored in their new roles, and that responsibility and autonomy had to be earned: an indication that these MATs were engaging in managerial-style governance, as well as hierarchical governance, where outputs (in the form of pupil results and Ofsted grade) bestowed legitimacy on the organisation (e.g., Newman and Clarke, 2009). CEOs were vulnerable to the risks and decisions they were taking on behalf of the MAT and were not afraid to take away power until such responsibility could be demonstrated. The fragility of building and maintaining solid and trusting relationships, and of engaging in the 'risk-taking act' (e.g., Bottery, 2004; Mayer et al, 1995; Rousseau et al, 1998), was most evident when a MAT was considering, or in the process of taking on new schools, where trustees saw it as vital to be 'building a bridge' with new staff, with the aim of forming strong relationships between individuals and representative groups at all levels. Subsequently, adherence to the MAT's mission and vision was more likely.

Chapter 7 will now address the issues around the legitimacy of the MAT.

CHAPTER 7: RQ3: WHAT DOES LEGITIMACY LOOK LIKE FOR MATS?

7.1 Introduction

This final chapter of the discussion and analysis of the data examines how legitimacy for the MATs was perceived by different participants, the focus of RQ3. Throughout Chapters 5 and 6, questions have been raised about how the governance and accountability structures adopted by the MATs, along with the expertise of the trust board, had given them the authority and legitimacy to run a large education establishment. For networks to mature and be sustainable and resilient, it is necessary to ask how they are engaging with and supporting the ongoing development of internal and external legitimacy (Popp et al, 2013). Greaney and Higham (2018), in their concern for the legitimacy of MATs, ask how the school system could secure trust amongst its stakeholders. As this study has shown, trust is largely dependent on how far those in policy-actor positions are seen to legitimately represent or can effectively claim to represent the interests of the various groups involved in the MAT (e.g., Seward, 2005), and with what authority.

A discussion of the data analysis in relation to how MAT leadership and governance was sought to be legitimised is presented in this chapter through a number of lenses. Section 7.2 discusses how leadership of the MAT was perceived to be legitimised through those in charge displaying appropriate knowledge, expertise and experience. This is in reference to the main bodies of power in the MAT: the CEO, the trust board, and the MAT central staff. Section 7.3 discusses how legitimacy was conceived through the parameters of plurality, representation, consensus and shared values. This section concludes with a discussion on axiological positioning, including the education/business values tension, and the apprehension over maintaining the ethos and vision of the founding academy as the MAT expands.

7.2 Legitimate leadership through appropriate knowledge and experience

Legitimacy is likely to be conferred by a clear display of educational knowledge and experience in those who run the organisation. This section examines such knowledge and expertise amongst the CEO, the MAT staff and the trustees, and comments on how the presence or otherwise contributed to the claim to legitimacy.

7.2.1 CEOs with a track-record of educational excellence regarded as legitimate

Each of the MATs had been founded by the CEO in place at the time of the research, and was based on their own ethos and values, central to which were concepts of *'equality, community and inclusion'* (CEOs of Chalkdown, Pastures New and Hazeldene), and *'the need to do something for the children in this area'* (CEO, Heron Trust) . They believed that creating a MAT, which put them in control of their own destiny, would place them in a better position to achieve these ideals. Coming from a lifetime in education, from classroom teacher to headteacher, through to regional and national school improvement leads, they were well-regarded by the LA and DfE. All of which positioned them favourably in the initial stages of founding the MAT, as, according to the CEO of Heron Trust, the leadership badge *'opens up doors'*, a position affirmed by Cousin (2019: 533) who claimed that status was indeed *'conferred by the NLE [National Leader of Education] badge'*. These CEOs, and the MATs they led, were thus shaped by their influence in the field of education, their expressed ideological values and socio-political interests, and perhaps a desire for power (Wilkins and Gobby, 2020). CEOs were displaying a concern that was allegedly oriented towards *'social vision and change'*, not simply organisation goals (Gunter, 2016:167). Bush (2020a) observed that for school principals moving from classroom teaching to *'the top job'*, it was the culmination of many years professional practice, and tended to be accompanied by high regard by both the teaching profession and the administrative hierarchy: their professional knowledge and skills acted as *'emblems of personal achievement'* (Fairclough, 2015:90). Moving to the position of CEO was a step beyond this, one which, according to Pastures New's CEO, put them *'in charge of everything'*, a role which until the creation of MATs, would have been that of the LA. The pinnacle of ambition had shifted upwards, with clear implications for those in headship roles, with regards to the power they wielded, and to the vast responsibility they now held, possibly akin to that of the LA. Indeed, Hughes (2020:491) calls on further research to be done into the *'investigative practices'* of CEOs, compared to Directors of Education at LAs in England, and this study provides a basis for such research.

This portfolio of relevant experience within the CEO established confidence amongst both trustees and academy principals: the view that the management and direction of the MAT was in safe hands, and that the CEO's experience and knowledge, as well as drive and

ambition, were pivotal to the success of a MAT. The term *'the jewel in the crown'* was used by Chalkdown's trust chair to describe his CEO, a reflection of a recognition of strong and stable authority (e.g., Ringen, 2013), and most trustees doubted the success of the MAT without the CEO's *'charismatic'* leadership (trustee, Chalkdown). The CEOs' personal qualities contributed to conferring legitimacy, and in engendering trust and confidence, with them being described by various trustees from different MATs as *'honourable'*, having *'integrity'*, *'honesty'*, and *'approachable'*, indeed, a reflection of the Nolan Seven Principles of Public Life (e.g., UK Government, 2022), which Chalkdown's CEO claimed was the basis for her leadership. However, when considering CEO succession-planning, there was disagreement on the qualities needed for a replacement, even amongst CEOs themselves. CEOs' experiences of being in the role of effectively managing a very large business, had led them to appreciate that it was not aligned to that of headteacher, and that a new set of skills had to be learned – skills and qualities that were *'not natural'* to them. Some participants, including a CEO and a trustee from the same MAT (Chalkdown), conceded that a MAT did not need an educator at the top (*'I think you could [be a CEO without an education background]'*, CEO, Chalkdown), so long as they were advised by one, in the form of a deputy, or other Director, a role modelled on the CEO of a private enterprise (e.g., Gobby, 2013), and perhaps an example of *'distributed leadership'* (e.g., Leithwood, 2001).

A more common view amongst participants, was that appointing an educator as CEO was incontestable: *'The CEO has to live and breathe education'* (governor, Chalkdown). Someone with the *'intellectual machinery'* and knowledge of education, to exercise *'legitimate and calculated power'* (Rose and Miller 2010: 280), over the whole organisation: someone who, according to trustees and governors, was *'steeped in'* education (LGB Chair, Hazeldene) rather than a *'bean counter'* (trustee, Chalkdown). This differing of views on the conceptualisations of the role of CEO denoted a potential source of friction, in that it pointed to a growing synergy between the role as both education provider and as business manager (e.g., Hughes, 2020), a situation which was unwelcome to many stakeholders, particularly local governors and parents. The CEO was instrumental in devising the governance and accountability models of the MAT, which affected everyone involved. Having someone at the top who, in the words of various participants,

understood the *'business of education'*, who *'speaks the same language'* as teaching staff, would be more likely to engender mutual respect and tolerance for different views (e.g., Hammersley-Fletcher et al, 2018).

Both of these views about the desired skills for the CEO reflected the tendency to see leaders-as-heroes (e.g., Cohen, 2010; Collinson et al, 2018; Kulz, 2015). On the one hand, there was the 'jewel in the crown' figure, 'steeped' in education, who had personable and honourable qualities, difficult to find in any other individual. In this model of heroic leadership, the very success or indeed survival of the school, or MAT in this case, relied on this figure to consistently excel in their role (e.g., Bush, 2020a; 2020b). As Bush (2020a:3) notes, this narrative assumes that school effectiveness is closely linked 'to the quality of the leader at the apex of the hierarchy', and as evidenced in this study, each of these CEOs had an excellent reputation for improving school effectiveness. On the other hand, there was the model of CEO as business leader with their lauded characteristics of entrepreneurialism, corporate-mindedness and managerialism, so valued at the inception of the Academies Programme (Gunter, 2016; Wilkins and Gobby, 2020), as 'heroes of enterprise' (Ball, 2007:177). In their critique of leadership romanticism, Collinson et al (2018:1642) identify the need for a critical examination of the 'seductive image' of the leader-as-hero, and its various interrelationships with its 'continued allure' in leadership studies. They warn against a form of leadership where critique is excluded, and ask us to consider the 'conditions, processes and consequences' of the followers, if disenchantment sets in, and the leader is no longer seen to be on the pedestal. As this study has shown, there was no disenchantment with the current CEOs. However, a new, more business-oriented CEO, with less personable qualities and a less transparent vision of education, may evoke different reactions, and the 'followers' in the form of a range of stakeholders, may indeed be more critical of the leading figure. As much of the research on 'leaders-as-heroes' has focused on school principals, executive principals and headteachers, this study contributes to that body of study by shining a spotlight on the CEO-as-hero.

If the MAT was seen to be only working well because the person at the top had integrity, a concern expressed by at least one trustee (Chalkdown), then this highlighted the tenuousness of a system based on the confidence of stakeholders in the leader. Such a

precarious sense of confidence and trust in the leader is reflected in Tschannen-Moran and Gareis' (2015) discussion of the link between authenticity and accountability, where they identify authenticity as being a key component of trust: the more authentic a school leader was perceived to be, the more their staff would trust them. An authentic leader treated their staff with respect, rather than 'pawns to be manipulated', argue Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015:260-261), and was able to break away from any role stereotyping, and behave in ways more consistent with their 'true selves'. Due to the newness of the MAT system, there was no role stereotype to adhere to, or break away from, other than a CEO of a business, nor was it possible to judge whether these CEOs were acting 'their true selves'. However, the track-record in education of these CEOs could be regarded as giving them authenticity, and thus being trusted to be responsible with accountability. Academy staff respected their CEO precisely because of their relevant expertise and competence in school leadership and school improvement, and they believed they were getting '*real skill*' (Assistant Principal, Chalkdown). Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) found that competent school leaders were seen to hold their staff to account in ways that were regarded as fair and reasonable. Applying this to the CEO/academy leader relationship, this raises the issue of how far staff would trust and respect a CEO who did not show competence in the necessary field, and how far accountability would be seen as 'fair and reasonable'. It also poses the question of how authentic a non-educator would be regarded by academy leads and the MAT community, and thus how legitimate they would seem to be in their role; a replacement CEO from a business background, without the same uncritical 'allure', may run the risk of falling from the pedestal.

7.2.2 Expertise and knowledge of the MAT staff

The analysis showed that the perceived educational competency of the central MAT management team also bestowed legitimacy on the MAT. Their educational experience in school improvement and staff development was essential in instilling confidence across the MAT community, particularly valued by senior academy staff and leaders, and was thus accepted as 'legitimate knowledge' (Riddle and Apple, 2019:3): '*they'll send people to work with us as well, to help us look at what we can do about it*' (HoS, Chalkdown); *for them to be able to come in day-to-day, teaching [...] "this is what you need to be doing to*

get to outstanding”, [...] that breeds confidence within staff” (Assistant Principal, Chalkdown). For non-managerial staff and parents of schools being taken on by a MAT with demonstrable education expertise, they felt assured that they were being delivered ‘the real thing, authentic’ education leadership (Saward, 2005:193), with ‘*a track record for doing well*’ (parent governor, Chalkdown). Viewed through the theoretical perspective of policy enactment (Chapter 3), where policy-making was about ‘representations of knowledge and power’ (Maguire et al, 2011), this study suggests that the MATs were developing and enacting new, sometimes controversial policies within a legitimate ‘external context’, based on their acquired knowledge and educational reputation (Braun et al, 2011), and for this reason were considered authentic. A sponsor with no or little experience of compulsory education was not seen as bringing in the same quality of provision, support and skills-set, and so not tailored to the needs of its academies. For the MATs in this study, being seen as legitimate holders of substantial power, was vital for their credibility and success, to ensure that all their stakeholders were genuinely on board with the central message and mantra.

7.2.3 ‘Legitimate knowledge’ amongst trustees: a danger of lack of relevant ‘intellectual machinery’ to provide rigorous and confident challenge

For the MAT leadership to be fully legitimate, and to be seen to have legitimate knowledge, it would be reasonable to expect the trustees also to have the necessary expertise and knowledge in education. In their collection of essays on democracy for education, Riddle and Apple (2019) critique legitimate knowledge held by school staff, and posit that only leaders who show appropriate, legitimate knowledge in their field, could be regarded with any authority. Chapter 5 discussed how trustees had been appointed by CEOs because of their positions as very senior leaders, directors or managers of large companies, chosen for their skills, knowledge and expertise across different sectors, but with a strong element of business expertise. Wilkins (2015:195) has identified a shift in the culture of governance in academies to a ‘risk-prepared, professionalized culture’. However, where Wilkins discusses this in relation to local governors, this study has shown that it was amongst MAT trustees where business expertise was sought and valued, and where professionalization was more apparent. Trustees with education backgrounds were valued by the rest of the board, but tended to be in the minority, and not necessarily experienced in the relevant phase of education for

the majority of its academies. Such trustees ('the education trustee' as described by participants) supported the board by helping other trustees to 'grasp the truth of the programme' (Rose and Miller, 2010:28) of education, through asking the '*right questions*' (trustee, Chalkdown), and demonstrating the confidence to trust the teaching staff, whom they deemed to be the true experts in education. This imbalance in education-business expertise on the trust boards had caused trustees themselves to worry that having limited education experience could compromise the trust board's ability to provide rigorous educational challenge. 'Education trustees' were alarmed that not all trustees had sufficient understanding of educational issues to present challenge to the CEO, and that a lot of explaining was needed to help the trustees understand the language of education. By their own admission, trustees with no education background recognised their weakness in applying governance, and relied heavily on the competencies of MAT staff, or they resorted to seeking external advice. Chalkdown's Trust Chair admitted that trustees knew that despite having '*all the business skills in the world*', they were operating within an unfamiliar field, one where their limited education expertise could potentially result in a less-scrupulous CEO, '*pulling the wool over [their] eyes*'.

Given these concerns, it is important to ask whether the combined expertise and knowledge of these trust boards had the appropriate 'intellectual machinery' to inform itself (Rose and Miller, 2010:280). Rose and Miller (2010:280) suggest that in order for a programme (and here, we can substitute 'MAT') to lay claims to a certain knowledge of the issues and problems to be addressed, it has to demonstrate this knowledge, in order to 'exercise legitimate and calculated power' over the programme, and thus, by implication, the individuals within that programme. They argue that governance requires the ability to 'grasp the truth' of the particular sphere of the programme ('education', in this case). Whilst there was evidence from the collective experience and skills within the trust boards that they were equipped with the 'intellectual machinery' to run a business organisation, it was not obvious that this enabled the application of what Rose and Miller (2010:280) describe as 'disciplined analyses of thought' within the education field. The problem identified in this study was that whilst trustees from non-education backgrounds seemed confident in their role to challenge, question and probe decisions within their

area of expertise (typically finance and company organisation), they felt less qualified to do this in matters of education. Trustees appeared to be translating the language of education to a business model, presumably where they felt comfortable within their 'intellectual machinery' and were applying the values and norms of business to the 'programme of education' within the parameters of 'hard governance', such as target-setting and performance management (Ozga et al, 2013:207). Within this context, the study has raised a concern over trustees' authority and legitimacy in being engaged in high-level decision-making and policy discourse, accountable for the whole MAT, and being able to offer informed challenge to the CEO.

Yet through analysis of the data, it could be argued that, as trustees could not be experts in all areas, they had entrusted each other to take the lead within their own area of expertise, and to make quality decisions on the Board's behalf: *'there are better minds than mine, and I have trust that they know what they're talking about! And then the bits that I do know what I'm talking about, I'm happy to engage and influence'* ('education trustee', Chalkdown). This could be regarded as a collaborative version of Rose and Miller's 'intellectual machinery' having been created by individuals trusting each other with the relevant knowledge and expertise. These trust boards were all relatively new, and as Richardson and Jordan (1979) noted in their examination of policy communities, would therefore be working on presenting a shared interpretation to address problems, present a validated response to the MAT community, and agree ways of 'selling policy' to its staff (Ball et al, 2011). This 'trust in others' identified in the data, could be an indication of 'mature professionalism', which is an important element of self-improvement in schools (Tinker, 2015:19). However, Tinker was mainly referring to local instances of professional innovation, where knowledge was transferred through professional communities and institutional partnerships. This study has identified knowledge exchange between academies, and expertise coming from the MAT team to individual academies. But there was no consistent evidence of the creation of a professional, expert community across all levels of the MAT, where the voices and expertise of academy leaders and their senior staff were mixed with those of the trustees and MAT staff on a more egalitarian level. Bestowing academy staff with the power and authority to be part of a wider network of knowledge exchange and debate, would be a move towards 'networked

autonomy', which acknowledges the important contribution of key stakeholder engagement (Tinker, 2015:16), and would be more likely to add to the organisation's intellectual legitimacy.

Compounding factors identified in the analysis, in relation to the MAT's legitimacy, included stepping outside its areas of expertise or expanding its portfolio of academies, without full consideration for the make-up of the trust board and its claims to representation through plurality. The next section will examine how far the trust boards worked within the framework of plurality, and consensus, and how this linked to the perception of the MAT as a legitimate education organisation.

7.3 Legitimacy through plurality, representation, consensus and shared values

As noted in Chapter 5, the process of appointment to the trust board was opaque, and trustees were often known to each other from previous connections with the CEO, leading to a potential concern over lack of plurality and representation amongst this highest tier of governance. This created a sense of comradely reliance and trust on the skills and expertise of others, with the consequence of a desire for consensus amongst the board. There was deep concern amongst some participants about business values taking precedence over education values, and so shaping the MAT into an organisation that they would no longer recognise, and by extension, be a legitimate provider of excellent education. This section will discuss each of these issues, in relation to how legitimate the MATs were seen to be.

7.3.1 Plurality and representation in the trust board

Analysis has shown that many trustees were appointed with little formal process, with a '*nudge-nudge wink-wink*' from the CEO (trustee, Hazeldene), and a sense of '*sliding into*' the new role of trustee (trustee, Pastures New), often from one of local governor, causing Heron Trust's CEO to admit that an '*external voice*' was needed on his trust board which currently comprised mainly ex-governors. This tendency to form a trust board made up of known colleagues, most of whom lived in the same local area, earned Pastures New's CEO the label '*hunter-gatherer*' from one of his trustees, but this levity concealed a more serious consideration. The system of appointment of trustees, with its apparent lack of transparency, was seen by an ex-sponsor to be particularly vulnerable if a non-educator

were to be CEO, who could be more likely to appoint *'their mates'*, presenting what he conceived *'a very dark world, behind closed doors, and not very accountable'*. There was therefore the situation where trust boards were seen to be appointing 'people like us' (Wilkins, 2019:150). Wilkins was particularly referring to local governing bodies, but his warning that this tendency to appoint like-minded people, who share knowledge, preferences and priorities, as a way of securing compliance and consensus amongst governors, could be applied to the composition and process of the appointment of the trust board. If it were the case that MATs tended to appoint trustees in the same image as everyone else on the board, then that could jeopardise a true understanding of the varying needs of stakeholders and individuals throughout the MAT, and would be a further contributing factor to the 'crisis of legitimacy' identified by Glatter (2013:n.p.), where he warns that education governance legitimacy is now not judged against civic participation and democratic control, but rather against what Wilkins (2019:151) termed 'corporate and contract measures of accountability'.

In their critique of the conversion process to become an academy, Gunter and McGinty (2014) use Hannah Arendt's (1958) analysis of pluralism and natality to examine the impact of a narrow field of voices. They assert that a lack of plurality of interest groups and options in the process limits the debate to those of 'co-opted professionals as reform managers' (Gunter and McGinty, 2014:300). Looking through the lens of plurality, it is possible that the make-up of trust boards in this study had the potential to limit their ability to understand the needs and motivations of academy staff and communities, especially schools with a very different profile from the founding academy. This lack of understanding, in turn, could influence their desire or otherwise to compromise and negotiate with academy leaders, local governors and other staff. For the larger MATs with a wider geographical spread, trust boards could, outwardly, be seen as more pluralistic, in that trustees did not have the same close connections with the CEO or founding academy and did not necessarily know each other. However, as analysis has found, diversity of culture on the trust board was identified as an issue amongst some local governors (though not by trustees themselves): most of these MATs' trustees were White British, whilst many of their academies (particularly Chalkdown) served Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities.

Thus, there was awareness at a local level, that the body responsible for central governance was not necessarily representing the ‘priorities, knowledge and preferences’ (Wilkins, 2019:150) of its academies. However, one could argue that legitimate representation involves the representing of attitudes and ideas, rather than the need to share social characteristics and identities (Saward, 2005). Each of the trust boards in this study made claim to represent the best interests, which arguably must include their attitudes and ideas, of all those involved in the MAT: in particular, all trustees were at pains to claim that it was the interests of the children’s education which was of prime importance. Saward (2005:193), in his study of political representation, notes that a key challenge amongst non-elected officials who hold political power, is to ensure their claims of representation are accepted. He argues that one way such officials use to establish the authenticity of their claims is through appealing to their status as ‘untainted’ representatives, independents with no political affiliation. The trust boards in this study were undoubtedly ‘untainted’ by the presence of democratically-elected councillors, and because they were unpaid could attempt to lay claims to independence and authenticity. However, this does not address the problematic issue of cultural and demographic representation of the student and community population of the MATs, and did not seem to enhance any claims to legitimacy through representation. These issues around plurality and representation are also important for local governance and are addressed below.

7.3.2 Plurality and representation at local governance level

For LGBs/LABs also, there was a danger of appointing only ‘people like us’ (i.e., White British professionals), their purpose being to contribute to the ‘smooth functioning of the governing body’ (Wilkins, 2019:150), without attending to the problematic issue of representation: *‘we are basically White-British as a board [...] ‘we’ve become less representative of our local community’* (local governors, Chalkdown). Certain feminist scholars have argued that heterogeneity within the deliberative process is important for giving value to the various, and not necessarily consensual, ideas of the group (Newman, 2005). Here, governance is seen as a ‘field of contestation’ (Wilkins and Olmedo, 2019:3), with an opportunity for the legitimate voicing of differences, through ‘deliberation and mediation’ (Ranson, 2011:411), a situation not identified in this study. Young (2000:152-3) maintained that ‘representative’ bodies should entail organisation around group

identities, which would discuss issues of particular concern to them, rather than a focus on the search for overall consensus amongst the wider body. However, the argument for the representation of ideas and attitudes being more legitimate than representation of identity (Saward, 2005) was articulated by an ex-sponsor, who challenged the idea of necessarily favouring elected politicians over lay members. He believed that having (non-LA) governors '*who understand the business, people who understand the industry*' was preferable to appointing elected politicians just because of their status, which may only be a nod to democracy, without being meaningful for the 'business' of education. This view also challenges the arguments put forward against epistocracy (rule by the most knowledgeable), which is criticised for upholding an undemocratic and professionalization model of governance (e.g., Wilkins, 2019): yet, as has been documented, most participants in this study would welcome educationally 'knowledgeable' trustees to represent them.

7.3.3 A need for consensus for the survival of the MAT

According to trustees, and as documented in Chapter 6, for its survival, consensus on the mission, values and procedures, was required throughout the MAT ('*we strive for the consensus view*', trustee, Pastures New): a case of consensus in governance demonstrating the 'high-reliability' of the organisation (Reynolds, 2010:18). Academy leaders were expected to embody and deliver these, a further example of the force of compliance amongst academy leaders, and of their limited scope for school-level decision-making, given that the MAT was now making the key decisions (Gibson, 2016; Stevenson, 2019). This expectation of an unquestioning adherence to and delivery of the MAT message was not a move welcomed by everyone in the MAT governance, particularly those with education expertise, if this resulted in educational professionals acting against their own instincts and integrity, and behaving like '*clones*', as one Chalkdown trustee feared. The lack of scope for debate and challenge between academy leads and the trust board, and between the trust board and local governors, could signal a decrease in the notion of 'thinking otherwise' (Ball, 1993:14), and could also illustrate the existence of the boundaries between 'legitimate and illegitimate dissent' (Newman, 2005:134, citing Cooper, 1998). 'Legitimate dissent' appeared more acceptable at trust board level, although only up to a point: even here, there seemed to be some

discomfiture with the concept of ‘dissensus’ (e.g., Wilkins and Olmedo, 2019), and an eagerness for agreement, for ‘*value judgements*’ to be ‘*done by consensus*’ (Trust Chair, Chalkdown).

It is of some concern that this drive for consensus within each MAT may have been at the cost of inclusion and could have resulted in participation inequality, the antithesis of Wilkins’ (2019) model of participative stakeholder model of governance, although Newman (2005:132) argues that participative governance is oriented towards consensus, as it assumes that ‘different interests can and should be subsumed by a common goal’. This could signal a move towards ‘groupthink’, identified by Mayne and Rieper (2003) as a problem faced by networks, and reflected by the unease Ehren and Perryman (2018) expressed over the danger of centralised decision-making leading to schools not being encouraged to think and act independently or develop innovative solutions for local problems.

If MAT governance were seen as a form of network governance, the need for consensus could be interpreted as staff being ‘locked into’ their MAT network, and restricted or limited in how they could act, as they were ‘embedded within a chain of mutually dependent relationships’ (Saward, 2005:193). Indeed, as shown in Chapter 6 (6.3.2), academy leaders valued the team approach provided by the MAT, looked to their peers for ideas and inspiration (Earley, 2013), enjoyed working with other like-minded leaders and preferred no conflict of opinions, rather than ‘developing ourselves in isolation’ (Hammersley-Fletcher et al, 2018:598) as could be the case for an autonomous headteacher. To reinforce consensuality, the MAT-led in-house training and staff development, which typically excluded links with external organisations, ensured delivery of the common message and vision. According to some academy leaders, excluding external voices reduced the risk of receiving ‘*conflicting views, what the MAT is saying, and what [the LA] is saying,*’ (HoS, Chalkdown). In his examination of one MAT’s leadership preparation and development (LPD), Gibson (2018) noted that high-quality LPD not only developed competent leaders who served their employer well, but also fostered criticality and reflection. Drawing on Bolam’s (1999) leadership development model, where ‘knowledge for understanding’ was key for developing critical-thinking leaders, Gibson (2018:96) warned of the danger of a MAT’s LPD being ‘purely to serve the

functional purposes of that MAT', resulting in leaders who lacked vision and knowledge about alternative choices. Without rigorous external quality assurance of a MAT's leadership training programmes, which Gibson advocates, and of which there was no evidence in this study, it was less likely that academy leaders would develop into critical thinkers, in a way which would question the central vision and ethos of the MAT.

Perhaps more controversially, Gibson (2018:95) also claims that, when comparing the impact of LA-provided training with inhouse training, typically adopted by the MATs in this study, 'diversity of supply does not necessarily create diversity of thought'. However, in this study, MAT academy leaders did not have, or rarely had the opportunity to mix and mingle with leaders outside of their MAT. Training from a range of providers would have offered the opportunity for staff to come together with external leaders and teachers, to listen to different experiences, share and exchange ideas, and consider alternative visions and directions: this diversity of opportunity to think differently would have enhanced their knowledge of understanding and developed their ability to be critical thinkers. In turn, this would have contributed to the MAT being seen as a legitimate centre for education, rather than the mono-vision which appeared to be being cultivated through the restricted delivery of staff training and development.

In their critique of leadership as paradox, Hammersley-Fletcher and Schostak (2020:54) noted that if we are to value the central tenets of democracy - freedom and equality of the multiplicity of voices - within education organisations, then even the most powerful educational structures should be open to challenge 'by the collective views of a critically debating public'. This study implies that this was not happening amongst these MATs. For the MATs, ensuring each academy was on board with the overall vision, dictated which schools they accepted, and once part of the MAT, maintaining that commitment was paramount. It justified the centrality of its rules by reference to shared beliefs (e.g., Beetham, 1991). In this way, each MAT hoped to 'draw legitimacy to itself because of the values, ideologies and ethos' it expressed' (Stoker, 2011:27-28), and was exerting a form of 'soft power' (Nye, 1990; 2008), in its striving to get others to share the organisation's ideas and vision. Whilst all academy leaders were seen to be openly adopting the vision, values and mission of the MAT, and some academy leaders were happy to do this, there were others who were suspected by an 'education' trustee (Chalkdown) of '*playing the*

game', through the respect they had for the current CEO, and who were perceived to be in a *'Kafka-esque play [...] going through the motions'*.

This question of values, and adherence to the MAT's mission, was a source of tension. It raised questions over foundational values of the MAT, upon which lay its legitimacy as an educational organisation, and will be examined next.

7.3.4 Axiological positioning: a tension over education vs business values

With the appropriation of structures, language and personnel from the world of business, examined in Chapter 5, there were clear signs that the MATs' values and modes, which focused on competitiveness and entrepreneurship, were being 'legitimised and given moral authority' (Ball and Junemann, 2012:24) by their trust boards. Chapter 6 noted that resistance to this model tended to come from those in less powerful positions, such as parents and support staff, who feared that the essence of the school was being somehow lost, and that any parental concerns would be judged through a more business-focused lens. For many participants, it was indicative of changes that were happening in the way that the organisation was approaching education: *'[It's] more of a business to them upstairs now than a school [...] they've lost that part of it still being a school'* (support staff, Hazeldene). In Rose and Miller's (2010:275) study of the discourse of public sector reforms, they stress that 'language is not merely contemplative or justificatory; it is performative'. Analysis suggests that the language used in these MATs was not merely suggestive of their thinking, but that it was indeed performative, guiding their actions, pointing to a new ethos, and it was that which was starting to alarm some participants at all levels of power.

In addition, there was unease over a founding school's core values and ethos being *'diluted'* (teacher and support staff, Hazeldene) when a school joined, thus jeopardising its legitimacy as provider of excellent education. This was a particular concern for those in MATs with a specialist ethos - the CofE MAT (Pastures New), and Hazeldene, whose founding school provided special education – who viewed an unknown school having the potential to, according to Hazeldene's trust chair, *'pull down the whole organisation'*. More positively, where no danger was anticipated to the founding school or fledgling MAT, participants were keen to extend their valued ethos into the *'wider arena'* (trustee, Hazeldene). This desire for sharing a common vision and ethos could be linked to the

concept of organic trust. Cranston (2011), in his critique of Bryk and Schneider's (2002) conceptual model of trust, argues that organic trust requires consensus over beliefs and a shared moral vision, and is typically only found in educational institutions where there is a long, shared history, and where there are likely to be strong cultural or religious bonds generating shared expectations and behaviours, as was particularly found in the two MATs presented above. However, for the newer MATs in this study, the shared beliefs and moral vision were yet to be assimilated: MATs were expecting organic trust from joining academies, which included consensuality and adherence to central values, without the accompanying history of shared expectations and behaviours.

The concern displayed for the ethos of the organisation could be an indicator that business values were not always necessarily the driving force for academisation and the creation of MATs, which some researchers had feared (e.g., Clarke, 2009; Wilkins, 2015). The study has shown that trust boards were keen to stress their commitment to building an organisation based on the principles and values of social justice and cohesion; an organisation which in fact 'shaped norms and values', rather than merely followed them (Tinker, 2015:111), and which could support their claims to legitimacy. However, this stated commitment amongst education system leaders to the principles of supporting social justice, has been questioned by Cousin (2019), echoing Ball (2008; 2013) and Glatter (2017), in identifying a culture of self-interest driven by 'survivalism' (Ball, 2008:45). Cousin warns of a shift in orientation towards the internal wellbeing of the education institution, and away from social issues within the community, and with this, an introduction of value systems where social justice 'seems peripheral' (Cousin, 2019:534). Interviews with the CEOs of this study challenged Cousin's interpretation, with CEOs claiming their values were steeped in equality of opportunity, working in the most disadvantaged areas, to provide an inclusive education experience, which they would argue gave them the authority to claim legitimacy; but analysis of interviews with local governors, and discussed in Chapter 6, could support Cousin's conjecture, as governors expressed disquiet over the lessening influence local players were having over local issues.

Ultimately, the study found general agreement that education values should be at the core of the organisation, and resist a 'values drift' towards a predominantly business

model (Wilkins and Gobby, 2020:320): amongst the less powerful participants at least, education should not be viewed as a marketable commodity, 'like bread and cars' (Apple, 2006:63). As Greany and Higham (2018) speculated in their examination of hierarchy, markets and networks within the self-improving school system, the study indicated that if the values in these MATs were to drift more towards those of business and managerialism, then many stakeholders would challenge the MAT's legitimacy as an education provider: whether the challenge would be successful is a matter for future research.

7.4 Summary of Chapter 7

This chapter has presented a discussion of the MATs' perceived legitimacy and contributing factors. First, the importance of the knowledge, skills and experience of the people leading the MAT - the CEO, trust board, and paid MAT staff. The CEOs' experiences, skills, status and reputations within the world of education gave a sense of authenticity, leading with 'strong and stable authority' (Ringen, 2013), conferring credibility on the MATs (e.g., Cousin, 2019). This, and the expertise of the central MAT team, engendered feelings of trustworthiness and a certain readiness for academy leaders to accept accountability (e.g., Bovens, 2007; Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015). However, amongst the trust board, there was a lack of 'intellectual machinery' (Rose and Miller, 2010) in the education field, making them largely dependent on the expertise of the CEO and central MAT staff in their policy discourse and decision-making. In the view of one trust chair, there was thus the spectre of such a trust board being misled by a 'less scrupulous' CEO, who would encounter little resistance to their proposals and educational claims. Equally, a lack of education understanding could have resulted in a board blocking helpful educational initiatives. The imbalance of business skills over education expertise amongst trustees caused worry for some: if business values took precedence, then there would be questions about the MAT's legitimacy as an educator, and would put in doubt its ability to 'draw legitimacy to itself because of the values, ideologies and ethos it expressed' (Stoker, 2011:27-28).

I have also argued that legitimacy can be conferred through the degree of plurality within governance, both at central and local level. In this study, most of these trust boards were

fairly homogenous and close-knit in their characteristics: trustees tended to be from a professional background, often known to each other through links with the founding academy, were typically White-British, and, if not known to the CEO, had usually been recommended by a fellow-trustee. Thus, there was a danger of 'people like us' (Wilkins, 2019:150) claiming to represent a very wide and often diverse population of academy staff and pupils, when in fact their understanding of the needs of this population was likely to be limited (e.g., Gunter and McGinty, 2014). This called into question the trust board's (and therefore the MAT's) claim to representation (Saward, 2005), and also its capacity for legitimate voicing of differences (e.g., Newman, 2005; Ranson, 2011; Young, 2000). With almost an aversion to dissensus (e.g., Wilkins and Olmedo, 2019) both amongst the trust boards and amongst academy leaders, there was a tendency towards 'group-think' (Ehren and Perryman, 2018; Mayne and Rieper, 2003). Consensus on the MAT's mission, vision and values was paramount: the very existence of the MAT depended on academy leads taking the MAT vision through to the staff and community, otherwise, in the view of one trust chair, the MAT would have no role. Internal staff training and development reinforced this adherence to the MAT's message, albeit at the possible expense of developing leaders with critical thought and knowledge of understanding (Bolam, 1999; Gibson, 2018).

The precariousness of these organisations was thus revealed: legitimacy resting on the reputation and trustworthiness of the CEO and management team but jeopardised by a lack of educational challenge and pluralistic representation from the trust board.

Compliant academy staff may have been willing to follow the MAT mission for now, but how much they would 'play the game' under a more business-orientated team, and with lessened representation for their academy communities is open to speculation.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

8.1 Summary of key findings and contribution to research

This study has focused on three, interconnected issues, embedded in the research questions: what governance and accountability meant to those involved in MATs, and the practical implications for individuals (RQ1); how the new systems of governance and accountability have affected the autonomy and agency of those in positions of local leadership and local governance (RQ2); and within this context, what factors contributed to the perception of the MAT's legitimacy (RQ3). Previous research has examined the policy implications of the new governance and accountability structures within an academised education system in England, particularly in relation to how this is a signifier of a new market-driven policy landscape within the public sector (e.g., Ball, 2012b; 2017; Gunter, 2011; Gunter and McGinty, 2014). Other research has demonstrated the changing role of governors and parents within the English education system, amid the concern about the professionalisation of the lay voice (e.g., Tinker, 2015; Wilkins, 2012; 2015; 2016). Misgivings have also been expressed about the side-lining of the local authority in education policy-making, and the consequences that this may have for local democracy (e.g., Simkins et al, 2015). Given these fears and the fundamental changes which the MAT system has brought to how schools are managed and governed, there have been calls for research into the implications for the legitimacy of these institutions (e.g., Glatter, 2013; Greany and Higham, 2018). This thesis has responded to the unease expressed in the previous research by focusing on how new structures of governance and accountability within a number of MATs has had an impact on the people who worked or were involved in them. Through a detailed interpretive phenomenological approach, it has included the experiences of not only the most powerful (CEOs, trustees), but those whose voices are often overlooked - junior staff, local governors and parents. By including this range of voices, the study has been able to build up a rich narrative of experiences, a 'thick story' (Apple, 2014) within four MATs, identifying the implications for professional agency and autonomy caused by the new structural systems adopted, and the parameters which were seen to define the organisations' legitimacy. In addition, the use of policy enactment theory has enabled individual experiences to be understood within the changing policy environment of moving from individual school to being in a MAT. It

has explored the disruption caused to professional agency and autonomy by individuals moving (sometimes unwittingly or unwillingly) from policy actors to policy subjects, and vice versa, and the impact this has had on professional working relationships with colleagues (e.g., Braun et al, 2011).

8.1.1 Differing experiences of governance and accountability: implications for status, professional autonomy and agency.

As detailed in Chapter 5, each MAT in this study had adopted a centralised system of a combination of hierarchical and managerial governance and vertical accountability, with the stated intention of ensuring consistency across the whole organisation. However, a lack of clarity in these lines of power and responsibility was a troubling feature for many participants. Stoker's (1998) conceptualisation of governance highlighted the potential for governance systems to create uncertainty and ambiguity about roles and responsibilities, which this study has confirmed as being problematic within the MAT system, and has given credence to the view of the academisation system as being 'messy and often confusing' (DfE, 2022:460), characterised at times by 'chaotic centralisation' (Greany and Higham, 2018:12). Despite both the UK Government's and the MATs' enthusiasm for centralised management and governance, muddled and opaque lines of accountability were indeed experienced by many stakeholders at both the MAT and the academy level, leading to a feeling of confusion amongst everyone, from members and trustees to academy staff, governors and parents, with these latter two groups also feeling a sense of detachment because of the uncertainty. As Ehren and Perryman (2018) noted in their research on school networks, this situation led many stakeholders within the MAT to ask who was accountable to whom and for what? This was in stark contrast to the Secretary of State for Education's assertion that *'Every part of the system, from strong trusts to local authorities, will be held accountable to a set of clear roles and responsibilities, so that no child falls through the cracks'* (DfE, 2022:43), and begs the questions, who will define those roles and responsibilities, who exactly will 'strong trusts' be accountable to, and how will this be monitored?

The findings demonstrated that this centralisation of control had the greatest benefits for those in charge, with little evidence of how they were being held to account by their academy communities, whilst for those with less power, there were very mixed

experiences. The study also started to address Ball's (2012b) question of how tightly or loosely education institutions are regulated. Findings suggested that the central MAT benefited from fairly loose regulation, whilst their academies were strictly regulated by the central MAT itself. For CEOs, the centralised structure was a welcome structure which ensured consistency across the organisation, gave them wide-ranging control over their newly-acquired schools, and enabled them to work much more autonomously, independent of the LA, compared with their previous role as headteacher. For trustees, the very significant responsibilities and power added to their professional portfolio and lent them kudos. For academy leaders, the picture was somewhat complicated. This study supports previous research (e.g., Gibson, 2016; Salokangas, 2013; Stevenson, 2019) in that it found that where, previously, some academy leaders had been autonomous headteachers of a stand-alone school, in charge of policy decisions and enactment, they were now subject to the policies and demands of the MAT, and as such, had been re-positioned as non-agentic policy subjects. However, the study has added to that body of research as the findings showed that this was not always viewed negatively by academy leaders. The 'wrap-around support' and educational expertise provided by the MAT, compensated most academy leads for any loss in autonomy, especially longer-term, where academy leaders' demonstrable success with responsibility tended to afford them more autonomy. Nor did academy leaders mourn the loss of status of the local governing body (LGB), which had been the result of the new two-tier structure of governance. Indeed, some welcomed the new lines of accountability which meant they largely reported to the MAT, all but by-passing the LGB, which no longer had the power to hold them to account or offer any substantial scrutiny. This 'by-passing' of local governors (often re-named 'advocates' to signify their new status), confirmed what Ball (2012a) had argued, that the central control of education policy-making had led to the marginalisation of traditional community-based policy-makers, and it was indeed local governors in this study who had experienced the most negative impact of the new governance and accountability systems.

[8.1.2 Central, hierarchical governance and upward accountability structures leading to the marginalisation of the local voice](#)

The analysis in Chapter 6 has shown that with greatly diminished powers and responsibilities local governors had been reduced to 'observers' in a 'rubber-stamping'

exercise. Yet despite their reduced status, local governors found themselves in a hybrid place where they were still expected to be accountable to their local community and be involved in some decision-making processes but did not have autonomous powers or authority to influence key strategic policy decisions, including holding the headteacher to account. Subsequently, the LGB/LAB had been forced into position of policy subjects, with the central MAT creating policies for contexts and situations with which they had far less knowledge and understanding than did the local governors. This had had a significant impact on local governors in two ways. First, the disruptions and distractions caused by the re-structuring of new lines of governance and responsibility had decreased their morale, and in some cases motivation for their role. Previous research has identified the impact of such disruptions caused by structural changes on teaching staff brought about by joining a MAT (e.g., Glatter, 2017; Salokangas, 2013); in addition, this study has been able to focus on the implications in terms of autonomy and agency of joining a MAT for local governors, and is thus a valuable contribution to this area of research. Second, because of the defenestration of the LGB, LA representatives had withdrawn themselves from boards, resulting in both a democratic deficit which Gunter (2011) had warned of with the academisation programme, and a knowledge deficit of local education and policy issues, including an understanding of the community the academy served.

Paradoxically, parents, who might have previously put themselves forward as local governors, believed the MAT was seeking individuals with professional skills, and that their lay and tacit skills would not be valued, leading to a reluctance to apply. This echoes research by Clarke (2009:38), who was concerned that academisation may result in local governors 'find[ing] themselves marginalised in the "business of governance"'. As parents and local governors were not part of the trust boards, or invited to meetings, this had resulted in a marginalisation, if not exclusion, of the local voice, with little opportunity for meaningful discourse or negotiation across the tiers of governance. Local governors or 'advocates' and parents were thus experiencing what Ball (1993:14) identified as 'policy as discourse', which determined 'who could speak, when, where and with what authority', and in these circumstances, their voices appeared to carry very little authority, with no platform or forum for parents and governors to challenge MAT decisions or meaningfully engage in debate about issues which would directly affect their

academy. They had been reduced to 'micro-actors' (Callon and Latour, 1981), in a system where the action of governance was distanced from the local players (e.g., Rose and Miller, 2010). This again raises questions about the government's commitment to ensuring that trusts be held accountable, if parents and the local community have no pathway to do this. It was also inconsistent with what Colebatch (2002) would have expected in education policy-making settings, where he noted that negotiation and coalition-building were typical. So too was it at odds with Wilkins' (2013) call for more participative stakeholder governance and accountability and was in danger of being an example of what Buckles (2010:7) had warned, of 'local idiosyncrasies, priorities and interests' being 'overridden' by policies and policy-makers from outside, or at least from a position of distance and with little local knowledge or appreciation of the academy community. It was somewhat ironic and certainly contradictory that local governors could no longer be trusted to make the 'massive decisions' in relation to their own academy, with their lay and volunteer status being cited as reasons for this, whilst this responsibility now lay with a small group of centralised trustees who, apart from the CEO and maybe some MAT staff, were also volunteers, and not necessarily from an education background.

For lay stakeholders to have a sense of 'belonging and control' over their academy (Tinker, 2015:11), it is worth considering whether the participative accountability and governance models of Wilkins (2012) or Hooge et al's (2012) multiple stakeholder accountability model could be applied here. When Wilkins (2012:22) referred to the challenge that academies faced when addressing accountability due to the 'unique position' that academies found themselves in, because of their independence from the LA but not from their sponsor, this study has clearly found that true participative accountability could only be instigated through, and with the will of those in charge of the MAT. Similarly, the model advocated by Hooge et al (2012), which suggested a mix of both vertical and horizontal accountability systems, would need a fundamental change in how MAT management viewed the flow of power in their organisation. The mainly upward accountability and hierarchical governance systems identified in this research left little room for either of these scenarios, but there were encouraging signs in that some trustees were open to Glatter's (2013:n.p.) model of 'upward, downward and lateral

accountability', where representatives from its academies (staff, governors and parents) could be on the trust board, and this would be a point worth pursuing in MAT policy development.

8.1.3 The importance of trust within the concept of 'earned autonomy' for academy leads.

This openness (by some) to a more consultative approach of the MAT working with their academies had at its heart the development and nurturing of trusting relationships, and the findings in this study contribute to the work of previous research on the importance of building trusting relationships within an educational organisation in order to improve motivation and performance and to create a respectful working environment (e.g., Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Cerna, 2014; Tinker, 2015; Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015). In this study, trust was conceptualised by trustees as 'building a bridge' with joining schools, where there was recognition that the staff and governors may have been through a difficult, even bruising experience, and may have been joining the MAT reluctantly: in some cases, headteachers were replaced in the process of moving to the MAT, and this would have been a significant change for many local stakeholders. It was not unusual for MATs at the beginning of their journey to involve the staff from their first joining school in MAT-wide policy development, to 'get it right' from the start. However, as the MATs started to grow, involving staff from schools as they joined was not common practice, which was perhaps indicative of the need to impose the MAT vision across the organisation, where any widespread consultation ran the danger of creating conflicting views and lack of consensus. This need to adhere to the MAT format and vision could explain CEOs' hesitance in bestowing autonomy to their academy leads: CEOs were placed in a vulnerable position when it came to the level of autonomy and agency, they were willing to give to their academy senior leaders, as the success of the MAT depended on such decisions. Engaging in what Bottery (2003:250; 2004:6) has termed 'calculative trust', CEOs were making judgements about the ability of their staff to show responsibility with autonomy, and this calculative risk highlighted the fragility of building and maintaining solid and trusting relationships, and of engaging in the 'risk-taking act'. Previous research on academy leader autonomy has framed these leaders as 'conduits for the sponsor's message' (Gibson, 2016:47) and 'key enforcers' of the centralised education

system where they were instructed to lead and manage change set by the sponsor (Stevenson, 2019:223).

Whilst the findings from this study have endorsed those key messages, they also showed that more subtlety existed in the decisions of the CEO to afford autonomy to their staff, and that particular circumstances influenced these decisions. These included, for example, where a joining school was known to the CEO through previous school improvement support and the school had responded positively to that support. In this case, mutual trust was facilitated through previously established relationships, where expectations of behaviour were already in place (e.g., Gurwitsch, 1962), an example of relationships in MATs operating within Husserl's 'horizontal structure of experience' (Schutz's, 1967a). The second factor was where the joining school had a good reputation for effective management and governance, and good student results – an example of what Braun et al (2011) refer to as approaching education policy development through an understanding and knowledge of a school's positive situated and external contexts. A third factor was a product of time: once an academy leader had been given time and opportunity to work within the vision of the MAT, adhere to the centrally-driven policies and structures, and understand their new responsibilities as a non-autonomous leader, then they were seen to be trusted to be able to move more from subject to agentic position, and with that, greater autonomy was bestowed. A virtuous circle thus developed, where academy leaders were keen to rise to the challenge and understood the urgency of demonstrating that the CEO's trust in them had not been misplaced.

In each of these circumstances, it afforded the opportunity to include the voices of a wider range of stakeholders in discussions about the direction of individual academies. Academy leaders who were trusted worked with their peers in the MAT to develop a shared understanding and common narrative (e.g., Colebatch, 2014) about issues which affected each of their academies, especially when they were geographically close, often resulting in innovative practice and new insights, which could be seen as the MAT attempting to work within Hooge et al's (2012:9) model of 'multiple stakeholder accountability'. Of great importance for the academy leads in this study, and which made becoming part of a MAT a positive move, this collaboration and tacit exchange of knowledge and information established a sense of collegiality amongst academy leads,

and contributed towards their professional agency, compensating for some loss in autonomy. It also helped to counter feelings of isolation often typical of the traditional head teacher role, boosting confidence and morale.

8.1.4 The fragility of the legitimacy of the MAT

The final focus of the study, and its contribution to conceptual knowledge, was how the legitimacy of the MATs was conceived, understood and interpreted by different stakeholders. Legitimacy was intrinsic to the themes of governance and accountability: the systems and structures of governance and accountability chosen by the MATs had a crucial part in framing the MAT's authority to operate as a legitimate education provider. This study has noted the calls from other academics that within the academised system, legitimacy is an important issue to be considered (e.g., Gibton, 2017; Glatter, 2017; Hatcher, 2014), and in their analysis on the self-improving-lead school system, Greany and Higham (2018) pondered how the school system could secure trust among professionals, parents and students. This study has made a contribution to the debate, by exploring with stakeholders how their MAT was seen to be legitimate, and what might the MAT need to do to improve its perceived legitimacy. Several elements contributing to the perceived legitimacy were identified: the relevant educational knowledge, experience, background and values of those running and governing the MAT; plurality on the trust board in terms of representation of the local academy communities and understanding their needs; and the toleration for 'dissensus' in decision- and policy-making and enactment, and the acceptance of diversity of voice.

Taking knowledge and experience first: with its centralised management and governance systems, those running the MAT (CEO, trustees and paid central staff) had to be seen to have credible expertise and knowledge in the field of education. In Chapter 7, I have argued that to claim legitimacy, the MATs were obliged to demonstrate a proven track record of having the 'intellectual machinery' (Rose and Miller, 2010:280) to lead their academies who were often headed by very experienced headteachers, and who, as one trustee pointed out, were the real education experts in the organisation. Academy leads, along with their staff, needed to have confidence in the MAT to support them in their role, and in their accountability to the academy community. Because of their reduced professional autonomy and agency in their role compared to if they had been head of an

autonomous maintained school, they were reliant on the MAT providing legitimate, credible leadership.

This study has found that most of that 'intellectual machinery' resided in the CEO, the 'jewel in the crown' of the MAT, in the words of one trust chair. Each of these MATs had been created by the headteacher of the founding academy, and were from a solid education background, with an impressive reputation for excellent school improvement at both regional and national level. Their paid MAT team had been chosen largely by them, and as such were also proficient and experienced in school development and improvement, as CEOs knew what to look for in their staff. All this lent legitimacy to the MAT in the eyes of academy staff, who felt confident that they were being offered 'what they needed'.

However, there were two problems identified around this reliance on 'leader-as-hero'. First, it was clear that when considering succession planning for the CEO there was disagreement over the background and expertise that this role demanded, which reflected a more general concern over the dichotomy of education vs business values which being part of a MAT presented. The prevailing view was that 'education values' should determine the type of successive CEO, and thus for 'an educator' to be in charge: for those with this view, this in itself would be more likely to afford the organisation legitimacy. Yet there was a significant minority, including a CEO and her trust chair, who believed that the role was so different from that of headteacher, requiring very different skills and expertise to run 'the business', that an educator was not necessarily needed, so long as they were supported by an educator, for example in the role of Deputy CEO. This was anathema to many participants, including most trustees, but also parents and local governors. It also showed a nervousness around the encroachment of the metrics and language of business into the arena of education, and along with the re-naming of many roles to those with business connotations – 'Directors', 'CEO', 'Executive Principal', which parents in particular were disturbed by, and for whom this could signal a 'dilution' of the founding school's values. Linked to this, was a concern that over-ambitious expansionism could weaken the MAT's ability to retain the integrity and commitment to its core values as an educator. This opposition to appropriating the symbols of business-driven organisations was a sign of some 'stakeholders' trying to push back against what Apple

(2006) had warned, of education becoming a marketable commodity, with its values, systems and language of business, which would also question the MAT's capacity to 'draw legitimacy to itself' (Stoker, 2011:27-28). However, due to the centralized management and governance structure and blurred lines of (mainly upward) accountability, for those who felt their voices were not welcome (parents and local governors), any attempt to push back would present an extremely difficult challenge.

The second problem relating to legitimate knowledge within the seat of power in the MAT, was the lack of it on the part of many trustees. Similar to previous research on school governors (e.g., Wilkins, 2015; 2016), the study has further identified a professionalisation of governance at the trust board level, which had led to a preference for a board weighted towards business skills (financial, HR, legal, etc.), at the expense of education expertise. Whilst some trust boards had up to two 'education trustees', plus the CEO (who at the time of the fieldwork in this study could be considered an 'education trustee' due to their experience, but not if they were to leave and were succeeded by a non-educator), they were in the minority, and this has raised questions over the ability for such a board to present informed, rigorous challenge in areas of education, and thus to hold the CEO to account. A less scrupulous CEO than those involved in this study, in the view of one trust chair, could 'pull the wool over the eyes', of trustees who did not have the appropriate intellectual machinery; conversely, a lack of education understanding on the part of trustees could result in ill-informed debate and decisions which could adversely affect the whole organisation.

This situation shows the fragility of a system which was based on the personal and professional qualities of one person: the CEO. In other research (e.g., Bush, 2020a; Bush 2020b; Cohen, 2010; Collinson et al, 2018; Kulz, 2015), the concept of 'leader-as-hero' has typically been applied to executive headteachers 'parachuted' in to rescue a school from poor results and a damning Ofsted inspection. This study has identified the CEO as that hero, where many participants were keen to lavish praise on this figure in their MAT, largely through his/her experience and professional and personal attributes. Senior figures especially, recognised that in order for the organisation to work, the person at the top needed to have 'honour' and 'integrity', and it was because each of the CEOs in the study was seen to have such qualities, along with their education expertise and

reputation, that academy leads (and indeed trustees) respected them, and were prepared to subjugate their own ideals and vision in order to be part of the MAT's mission. A CEO from a different professional background, with different values, may have found that their academy staff were not so willing to 'play the game', as one trustee feared, thus endangering the whole organisation. As recent Government policy has stated in its most recent White Paper (DfE, 2022), a 'Good' school could request to be removed from a weak MAT, which is a change in policy where once in a MAT, schools could not leave. This poses an important point of consideration for the MAT when appointing its CEO, trust board and MAT staff: the more trustworthy and legitimate these individuals and bodies are seen to be in managing the business of education, through their relevant education knowledge and expertise, the less likely an academy would be to request to leave; equally, a CEO, management and governance team with less education experience and more business-orientated vision could lose the confidence and respect of an academy and its community, prompting a request to withdraw.

Legitimacy examined through the lens of the plurality of those tasked with representing its academies and communities, and the degree to which voicing of differences was tolerated, raised some points for concern. This study has built on the work of Ehren and Perryman (2018), Hammersley-Fletcher and Schostak (2020), Newman (2005) and Wilkins and Olmedo (2019) in that it has shown that because of a limited range of voices at the highest level of governance, the opportunity for discussion and debate welcoming a conflict of viewpoints tended to be minimal, with evidence of an aversion to 'dissensus'. There was lack of plurality on trust boards and on LGBs/LABs, in the form of diversity of ethnicity (most were White British), socio-economic group (all trustees were, or had been professionals in their areas of expertise) or background. Many trustees were known to the CEO and to each other, and in this, we see what Wilkins (2019:150) warned against in LGBs in particular, in appointing 'people like us' at the highest seat of power in the organisation. This questioned the degree to which the MAT could legitimately claim to represent their academy populations, of whose needs and circumstances some trustees admitted to having limited understanding. This lack of plurality, whether intentional or otherwise, had the effect of limiting the opportunity for different, legitimate voices to be heard – voices, views and opinions which may have been counter to the prevailing

narrative, but which would have expanded the trust board's representation, and quite possibly presented refreshing and conflicting views to disturb the consensus. Wilkins and Olmedo (2019) have called for greater tolerance of 'dissensus' in education governance; Hammersley-Fletcher et al (2018) recognised the need for schools to embrace 'agonistic democracy', with its valuing of plurality and contestation. This study has added to those insights by highlighting the aversion to dissensus throughout the MATs, including amongst academy leads and staff. Academy leads were required to unquestioningly promote the MAT's mission and most of their professional development was provided in-house, severely limiting their opportunity to exchange views with 'outsiders', hear the perspectives of other school heads, and to consider alternative visions and directions for their own academy.

Whilst many academy leaders welcomed this closeness with internal colleagues, and lack of conflict of views, as it made their role within the MAT more straightforward and more collegiate, it raised a question, again, over the MAT's claim to legitimacy. Opening up contact with external colleagues (for both academy leads and local governors) would have presented the prospect of engaging in more diverse critically-informed debate, which was likely to have enhanced their 'knowledge of understanding' in education policy, initiative and leadership or governance issues, replacing the mono-vision currently in place. Expanding the field of debate to include 'outsiders' would have contributed to the MAT's legitimacy as a provider, guardian and critical appraiser of quality education, and would have given more credence to the Government's declaration that '*multi-academy trusts are the best way to advance education for the public benefit and can deliver clear benefits for teaching and pupil outcomes*' (Williamson, 2021:n.p.). As it stands, this study has shown this to be a dubious claim.

8.2 Reflection on the methodological approach taken, and my positionality as researcher

Chapter 3 showed how this study met the criteria for credibility, validity and trustworthiness (Section 3.8), and presented an evaluation of the methodology used (Section 3.9), showing the limitations of the study, and suggesting alternative strategies. The main thing I would have done differently would have been to ensure I had representatives of each stakeholder group at each research site. The reasons I was not

able to do this have been documented (3.9), and I do not think it has been detrimental to the overall study, but it would have given me more scope for examining the experiences of stakeholder groups in a wider range of contexts. This study did not include possibly the most important group within the MAT – children. A further study could look at the impact of a centralised governance and management system on the experiences of the students in the academies.

However, overall, the chosen theoretical framework has enabled the study to address the three key research questions, by including the experiences of participants who were embedded in the context of multi-academy trusts. The longitudinal nature of the study has been a valuable contribution to established research in this area. Through repeated visits over four years, I was able to spend considerable time in the field, and to include a wide range of participants at varying levels of power, from CEOs to parents. This enabled a multi-level analysis, which I believe was a particular strength of the study, as different perspectives could be placed alongside each other in an attempt to understand the context of the experiences of those involved in MATs, whatever their influence or position. Through the approach of constructivist phenomenological interpretivism, by ‘growing quiet and listening’ (Moustakas, 1994:63), I have been able to construct a space for participants to give their narrative of their experiences, of what was important to them within the parameters of the research, both professionally, socially and personally. In addition, the use of policy enactment theory enabled me to consider participants’ experiences of the new governance and accountability structures within the context of the new policy environment of the MAT. I was thus able to frame an interpretation on how the changes from being policy agent to policy subject, or vice versa, had had an impact on participants’ sense of autonomy and agency.

In my reflections on the methodological approach, I have been mindful of the impact of my positionality within this study, and the influence it may have had on my interpretations of the participants’ experiences. In Chapter 3 I referred to van Manen (1990; 2014)’s recommendation of the researcher using his concept of ‘bracketing out’ or ‘epoche’, to exclude my own experiences and thoughts from the inquiry. In considering this, I was aware that through my own professional experience I was part of the educational world of the participants, which many recognised and seemed to welcome.

On occasions participants used the phrase *'as you would know...'*, *'of course you will be aware...'*. Due to this, and my interest in the research topic (see Chapter 1, section 1.2), I need to acknowledge that I was not a completely independent or impartial observer, listener or interpreter. I brought my own personal and cultural perspectives, and tacit political commitments to the understanding of participants' narratives (e.g., Apple, 2013), becoming what Schwandt (1994:129) termed Eisner's (1991) 'connoisseur-turned-critic' in interpreting their experiences. Through this process, I trod a delicate path between the two positions: 'bracketing out' my strong opinions to not unduly influence participants' narratives and my interpretation of those, and placing myself as critical secretary who was able to 'come down from the balcony' (Apple, 2013:43) to open up spaces for both the professionals and lay participants in the study to 'talk back' (Rowley, 2014:52).

By reflecting on this positionality, I argue that the use of Bottery's (2003) conceptual tools on trust, risk and vulnerability, and the mutual familiarity between researcher and the researched around education issues, prompted participants to reveal insights which are often hidden from public scrutiny. Two CEOs were prepared to discuss their vulnerability within their new role, and the conflict this could bring; local governors disclosed feeling not valued; school leaders acknowledged their loss of autonomy was difficult to deal with at times; trustees conceded they did not know enough to be totally accountable and challenge the CEO; and parents admitted to not knowing who was in charge or what their role might be in the new organisation and fearing a shift in values. I suggest that the methodology used sought to offer a space where vulnerability was valued, and not regarded as a sign of undesired weakness, and this was the case in both individual and group interviews. I had given participants the chance to comment on their views and experiences, which some had never before been invited to do. When being a critical scholar, it is essential to not just be a detached observer ('on the balcony'), but to build trust and empathy with those in schools. I have been able to do this through my prior experience, which in turn has enhanced the empirical contribution of this study. This study has contributed to the body of research on the shift in educational governance and accountability through providing an opportunity for educators inside and outside of the MAT system to jointly reflect on what it means for education to be increasingly taken out of public scrutiny.

8.3 Dissemination of findings to date

- With one of my supervisors, Harriet Rowley, I was invited to write a book chapter: Ryan-Atkin, H. and Rowley, H (2022) 'When the MAT moves in: Implications for legitimacy in terms of governance and local agency.' In Kulz, C., Morrin, K. and McGinty, R. (eds) *Inside the English Education Lab: Critical Ethnographic Perspectives on the Academies Experiment*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 60-86.
- Discussions with CEOs (both in the study and not) of the recommendations (8.4) have either taken place or been arranged.
- Findings have been used to support the MMU Masters in Education. My unit included students who were MAT academy staff reflecting on their roles, and their understanding of the lines of accountability, and transparency in governance within their organisations. This could be developed for further courses, where there is an emphasis on criticality of thinking within leadership professional development.
- I have presented my findings at various stages of the study to a number of conferences and research interest groups, including at MMU, BERA, BELMAS and NERA.

8.4 Recommendations from the study

The findings in this study have led me to propose a number of policy and practice recommendations. However, in order for many of these to be seriously considered and implemented with any degree of success, there needs to be a shift in the neo-liberal ideological narrative which currently prevails within education policy formation in England. The policy and political discourse on academisation bringing autonomy to schools has been disrupted by the introduction of MATs. As Salokangas and Chapman (2014:383) argue, this discourse should be re-focused towards autonomous sponsors and their 'decision-making competence over the academies they run', the power they yield, and the impact on their academy communities.

8.4.1 Policy Recommendations

1. *A transparent structure and procedure are needed for holding MATs to account by their academy communities*

There is a need for a clear mechanism to be in place where the MAT is held accountable by its academy communities, through the metrics of ‘a set of clear roles and responsibilities’ (DfE, 2022:43) agreed between all parties, and which should be made public.

2. *An examination of the impact of the centralised governance system within MATs is needed*

There should be an examination and frank debate about how the shift in power from local to central governance, with the greatly reduced powers of the LGB/LAB, has had an impact on individual academies and their communities, in terms of responding to local need and priorities.

3. *There should be a review of how the MAT governance and accountability structures could include the local voice in decision-making, in order to restore autonomy, agency and democratic representation at academy level*

National policy should challenge the prevailing academisation rhetoric of ‘empowering pupils, parents and communities’ with a ‘clearly defined role for local government’ (DfE, 2016a, and reiterated in 2022), as this study has clearly shown these to be empty statements. Policy needs to address how the ‘local voice’ can be included in the decision-making process at both academy and MAT-level, in order to restore local agency, autonomy and the lay voice which have been lost through the new structures of governance and accountability. Currently, it is MAT management which has benefited from the promise of autonomy and breaking free from the ‘bureaucratic shackles’ of the LA (DfE, 2016a), not individual academies. If the national policy on the Academies Programme is indeed to lessen the autonomy and agency of local governors and academy leaders, as well as excluding elected LA representatives from local governing boards, and no moves are taken to address this, then there should be honesty about this, to avoid false expectations.

4. *There should be a move to enhance the legitimacy of MATs through pluralistic representation and appropriate expertise*

The make-up of MAT trust boards, and the skills and expertise of the CEO should be open to national debate when considering the expansion of the Academies Programme. The perceived legitimacy of the MAT depends on this body and individual displaying educational knowledge, expertise and sensitivity, which can face robust challenge. It also needs to represent and to some extent reflect the demographics of the academy populations. If this is not addressed, MATs are in danger of being seen as detached professionalised bodies, appointing ‘people like us’, who do not understand their academies’ specific needs, and where business skills are valued over educational acumen.

5. *There is a need to challenge the neo-liberal narrative running through national education policy, through joint working between academics and school colleagues*

In the spirit of Bourdieu (2003:36), there is a need for researchers to ‘fire back’ against dominant beliefs, by ‘putting research findings into an accessible form’. I suggest stronger support for researchers in teacher education and school leadership who have particular expertise to work with colleagues in schools and academies, to challenge the prevailing, neo-liberal narratives which threaten to normalise the professionalised business model of education prevalent within the Academies Programme (Ryan-Atkin and Rowley, 2022). This would mean researchers using our privilege of being scholars/activists to open up the spaces for those who feel they do not have a voice (e.g., Apple, 2013), or what they have to say is not valued or relevant.

8.4.2 Practical recommendations

Linked to these policy recommendations, there are a number of recommendations for practitioners, which mostly involve the MAT taking the initiative. It would be more difficult for local actors to mobilise and demand action by the MAT, although not impossible, and could be facilitated through some of the research suggested below (8.5). The academies’ communities are largely reliant on the good-will of their MAT, and in the MAT recognising the benefits to the organisation of making the recommended changes, and crucially, in involving their populations. Parents, local governors, academy leads and staff, and other members of the local community should demand that the

recommendations listed below are taken seriously, and that the MAT acknowledges that local involvement is crucial to the legitimacy and success of the MAT.

1. MATs to explore implementing a more participative system of governance and downward and lateral systems of accountability throughout their organisations, which would address the value of including the local voice and recognise the importance of restoring local professional agency and autonomy.

As the overarching national context is one of education policy moving away from locally-elected oversight towards appointed bodies, it is imperative that MATs explore formal ways of local actors (academy leads and other staff, governors, parents and members of the community) having a 'say' in how their academy, and indeed the MAT, is run, and to restore some of the agency and autonomy lost through the current structures of governance and accountability. This would involve two elements: first, MATs working with their academy communities to explore ways of meaningfully (not tokenistic) involving local governors, parents and other key community members in the decision-making process at both academy and MAT-level; and second, developing processes which involve their academy leads, including those of newly-joined schools, in policy formation and implementation, and overall vision.

2. MATs to incorporate systems which improve two-way communication between the MAT and its academies.

MATs to explore ways of enhancing two-way communication between the MAT and its academy communities (including staff and governors) so that these communities are knowledgeable and informed about the workings, dealings and vision of the MAT, and equally, that the MAT hears, understands and acts upon the concerns, wishes and ideas of its population.

3. MATs to look for ways to enhance the legitimacy of the MAT, including the following:

- a) Improve representation in governance, at trust board and LGB/LAB levels, to address the issues around lack of diversity and plurality.
- b) Reflect on the educational expertise within their trust board, make moves to improve this, where needed, and to capitalise on the local expertise and 'insider knowledge' of their academy communities. This would include examining their

strategy for CEO succession planning, to ensure that the background, expertise and values of this individual lends the organisation legitimacy.

- c) MATs to examine their attitudes towards tolerating 'dissensus' amongst staff and governors, whilst still maintaining the integrity of the organisation. Linked to this, would be a discussion on opening up training to external providers, and facilitating academy leads to mix and collaborate with heads outside of the MAT and the MAT system.

8.5 Suggestions for further research

Following the key findings and conclusions of this study, a number of opportunities and needs for further research have been identified, which would build on this study (listed below). Some include working with MATs, in collaborative partnership, to include their experience, perspective and ideas for the best way to approach the issues raised in the study – much as I have suggested that MATs would benefit from having a more collaborative relationship with their staff, local governors and local communities. In addition, it would be of benefit to conduct further longitudinal work with the MATs in this study, to track how far issues of concern have developed or been resolved. A more ethnographic approach would be useful in forming a researcher 'insider/outsider' perspective.

1. An exploration of how a participative governance model, and more diverse accountability structures could be achieved, in order to include and enhance the local voice.

Work with MATs to explore how a more participative system of governance, and a structure of accountability which included downward and lateral lines as well as upward lines, would be practicable. Explore ways of meaningfully involving local governors, parents and other key community members in the decision-making process at both academy and MAT-level, in order to restore some of the agency and autonomy lost through the current structures of governance and accountability. The emphasis in such research would be how the 'local voice' could have real power, rather than this being a tokenistic move, and how the introduction of the two-tier system of governance has affected the power relations between local governors and central trustees.

2. *An examination of how MATs could balance bestowing greater autonomy to academy leads with maintaining the integrity and vision of the organisation.*

Explore how MATs can involve their academy leads, including those of newly-joined schools, in policy formation and implementation, and overall vision. This could include the MAT examining its attitude towards 'dissensus' amongst staff, and how, by allowing this, it could still maintain the integrity of the organisation. A further facet to this would be exploring opening up training to external providers, and facilitating academy leads to mix and collaborate with heads outside of the MAT and the MAT system. Such a study could involve education unions in their role in supporting staff to have a 'say' and claiming back some agency.

In both the above suggested studies, there should be an exploration of enhancing two-way communication between the MAT and its academy communities (including staff and governors) so that these communities are knowledgeable and informed about the workings, dealings and vision of the MAT, and that the MAT hears and understands the concerns, wishes and ideas of its population.

3. *Investigating the concerns over legitimacy*

An exploration of the educational knowledge-base and expertise within trust boards, both on a generic level, and on the specific education and demographic context of the area, in order to address the concerns of competence in legitimate decision-making. Perhaps controversially, this may need to include members of the LA who have expertise in local education policy. Such a study should also include examining ways to improve representation in governance, at both levels, to address the issues around lack of diversity and plurality. It should also address stakeholder commitment to the 'MAT project', particularly where side-lining of local values and interests could undermine the MAT's claims to legitimacy.

4. *Impact on students*

Falling outside of the remit of this research study, but of great importance would be an exploration of the impact of a centralised governance and management system on the experiences of the students in the academies. This would of necessity include student voices.

8.6 Concluding comments

Through undertaking this study, I have been in a very privileged position to 'bear witness' to the experiences of a wide range of groups in some way involved in a MAT. Participants' narratives of how they have experienced the new governance and accountability structures, and the impact on their professional autonomy and agency have enabled me to present an interpretation of those experiences, allowing me to draw conclusions and present recommendations for future policy, practice and research, which aim to enhance the legitimacy of these organisations as valid providers of education where everyone's views and expertise feel valued. Another researcher may have offered different conclusions, depending on their positionality and interactions with the participants. The openness with which participants shared their views and thoughts was quite humbling at times, and certainly challenged some of my own beliefs, particularly about the advantages of the MAT programme. By working together with participants to construct their narratives, I was able to provide a platform for reflection and articulation of experiences. As Fielding noted (2009; 2011), by including and valuing the voices, aspirations and fears of people affected by, but not necessarily agentic, in systemic education change, I have been able to identify a more hopeful alternative. It is through the power of qualitative, and especially phenomenological research, that this has been made possible, and demonstrates the importance of collaborative working between academics and practitioners in order to understand and improve the education landscape.

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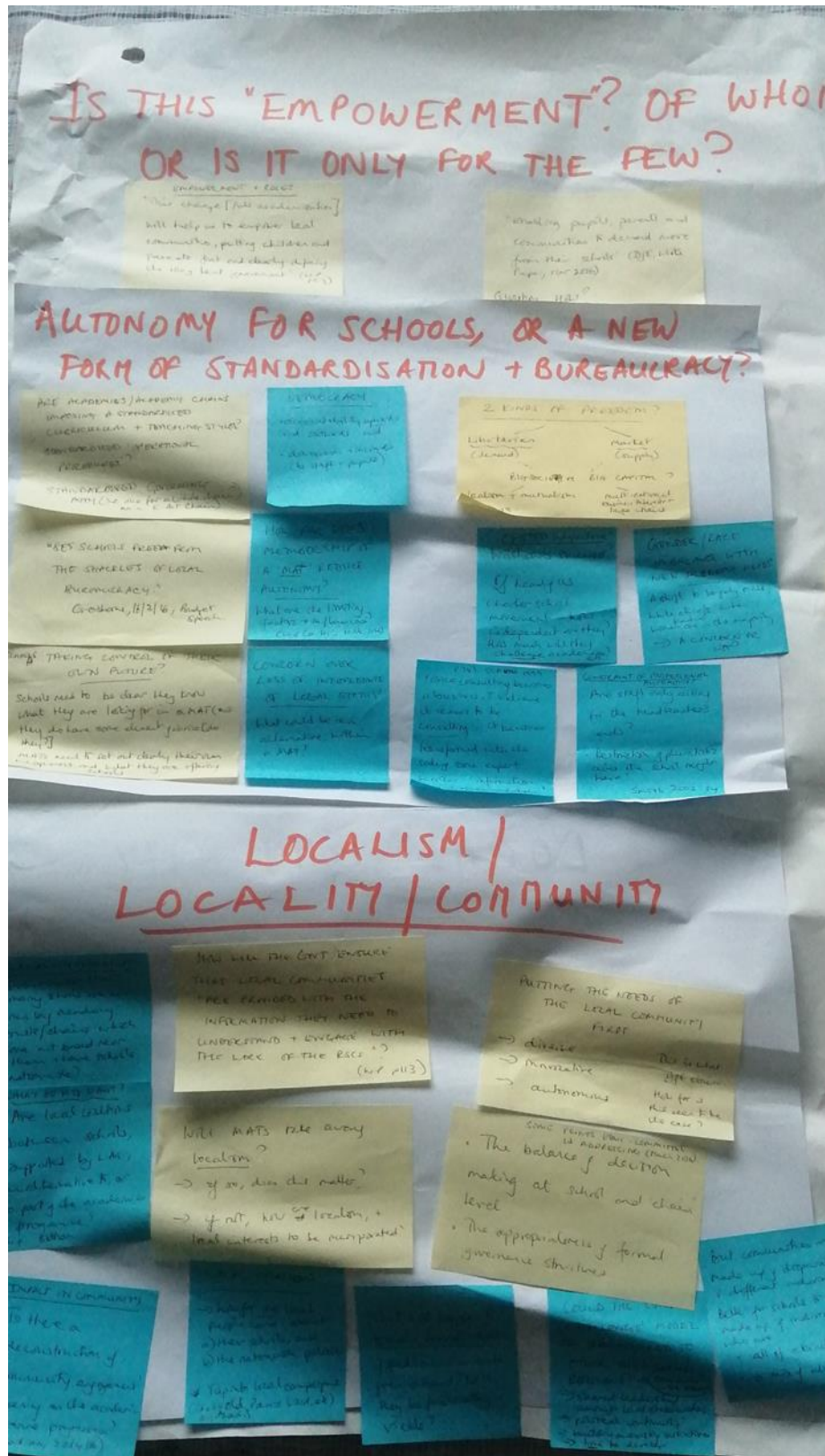
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APPENDIX 1

Formative mapping process to identify areas of interest: an example of some themes



APPENDIX 2

Participant Information Sheet

Accountability, governance and autonomy in the new Academies Programme

Invitation to take part

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. If anything you read is not clear or you would like more information, please contact me.

What is the purpose of the study?

With the Government's recent stated policy aim to make all schools in England academies, I am interested in exploring the issues around accountability, governance, autonomy and agency within a number of academies and multi-academy trusts which have recently undergone some form of change. This could be, for example, starting a new MAT, a change in sponsor, or individual schools joining a MAT. I hope to seek the views of school leaders, staff, governors, parents, and other members of the local community. I shall also be interviewing senior figures in MATs, and local authority staff.

Why have I been invited?

I am inviting you, as someone whose MAT has been involved in a recent change. You will be able to provide valuable insight on how individuals, and also the school and/or MAT community as a whole, approaches and views the move towards academy status. Your experiences and views on the issues I wish to explore within an academy system, will make an important contribution to the other voices in my study.

Taking part

Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. If you wish to be part of the study, I will then ask you to sign a consent form to show you agreed to take part. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

What will happen if I agree to take part?

The data I will be collecting will be through fact-to-face interviews, either individually, or in small groups. I shall have a question schedule, which you are welcome to see, but the nature of qualitative research, such as this, will invariably mean that new questions and issues will arise, depending on your answers to my questions, and what you in fact wish to discuss, in relation to the research focus.

How will confidentiality be maintained?

In order for me to focus on our discussion, and your responses, I shall be audio-recording our conversations. This is purely to help me get a true picture of your views, in my analysis, and shall not be available to anyone else. All personally identifiable information, including audio recordings and transcripts will be held on a secure computer server at Manchester Metropolitan University, where it is maintained under strict protocols as set out in the Data Protection Act 1998, and will adhere to the new GDPR Act (2018). I shall make a transcript of our interview, which you can see if you wish. Once the research is complete, the recordings will be held for the duration of the project. If you decide to withdraw from the research at any time, your data will be destroyed. Any reference to you, and your remarks, will be anonymised, unless you tell me otherwise, so that you cannot be identified.

Interviews typically last for 45 – 75 minutes – it may be that we will need to spread it out over a few days, to suit your timetable. You may also want me to interview you again, if you think of other issues, pertinent to the research, that we didn't cover the first time. That decision will be up to you entirely.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The data collected will form part of my final thesis for my doctoral degree. This will be submitted to the MMU examining board. It is also likely that research papers for academic journals will come out of this research, as well as presentations at conferences. All reference to participants in my research will be anonymised. I will be very happy to send you copies of any published papers if you wish. Findings may also be published in research journals.

Where will the study be conducted?

Interviews are most likely to take place in the school or your office (for central MAT personnel). For parents, the location can be negotiated.

Criminal Records Check

As a university tutor who visits students in schools on a regular basis, I have a current DBS certificate.

Contact for further information

If you would like to have further information about the research, please do not hesitate to contact me, by phone or by email:

Helen Ryan-Atkin

Senior Lecturer,

Faculty of Education

Manchester Metropolitan University

0161 247 2352

h.ryan-atkin@mmu.ac.uk

What if there is a problem?

Should you not be happy with the way I have conducted my research, in any way, please either let me know straight away or contact the following colleagues:

Dr Gee Macrory (Director of Studies for my research), Associate Head of Department of Primary Education,

Faculty of Education
Manchester Metropolitan University
Brooks Building
53 Bonsall Street
Manchester
M15 6GX
g.macrory@mmu.ac.uk
0161 247 2337

Dr Harriet Rowley (supervisor to my studies), Lecturer in Education & Community, Faculty of Education

Faculty of Education
Manchester Metropolitan University
Brooks Building
53 Bonsall Street
Manchester
M15 6GX
h.rowley@mmu.ac.uk|+44(0)161 247 2350

Professor Keith Faulks

Pro Vice Chancellor, Dean, Faculty of Education

Manchester Metropolitan University
Brooks Building
53 Bonsall Street
Manchester
M15 6GX
k.faulks@mmu.ac.uk
0161 247 2346

Thank you for taking the time to read this, and I do hope you will agree to participate in the study.

APPENDIX 3

Letter of Consent



Accountability, governance and autonomy in the new Academies Programme

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below.

	Please initial the box
1. I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above project and have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.	
2. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	
3. I understand the interviews will be audio-recorded.	
4. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes in any written reports coming out of this research.	

I agree to take part in the above project

Name of participant _____

Date _____ Signature _____

Role _____

Contact number _____

APPENDIX 4a

Example of Interview Schedule for Trustees (Phase 1)

(Interview with Pastures New, at a point when substantial data had already been collected from other MATs)

Background

- Why did you want to be a member of the MAT?
- Explain how you were appointed.
- Was there any difficulty in finding trustees/directors/members?

Your role as member/director/trustee

- I notice you don't use the term 'trustee'? How were the names for these roles decided?
- How do you see your role as trustee/director/member?
- What do you think you bring to the trust?
- And your position as chair?

Distinction between the members of the Multi-Academy Trust Board, and the Board of Directors

- What is the distinction between these two bodies?
- To Chair – you are on both. Why?
- Who holds who to account, and how?
- What powers and measures of accountability do each of the bodies have?
- Is one more powerful than the other?
- Are any of them paid positions?

Make-up and skills of the Board

- What skills do you think are needed to be a) a member of the MAT Board, and b) a director?
- Who has these skills in your MAT? Are there any skills lacking in the trust board?
- What are your thoughts about the balance of education skills and expertise with business skills and expertise?
- How important do you think it is to have a stable trust board, or is there merit in regular changes?
- How does your background, expertise and skills contribute to the running of the MAT? (Confidence?)

Board meetings , agenda-setting and decision-making

- How often do you have meetings, who sets the agenda, and who attends?
- What are the key points of disagreement, and how are these resolved?
- As Chair, do you ever come into dispute with the CEO?
- How do you make sure [CEO] is held to account?

Running of the Trust

- How do you ensure the academies in the trust are running well?

- What MAT paid staff are there, and do you envisage this group growing?
- What would you say are the HTs responsibilities, and how are they held to account?
- Are there any changes to the organisation of the Trust you would like to make?

The individual schools: knowledge, communication and values

- There are now 3?... schools in the trust. How do you remain knowledgeable about each one? Do you think there might be a time when trustees/directors will have to assume responsibility of different schools?
- How is information about each school transmitted to the trust board/board of directors?
- I notice from the [one of the documents] the central team ‘feeds and informs decision-making within the Board of Directors’. This sounds quite a one-way process: how far can the board bring issues to the central operational team (COT) of the MAT, and have any influence?
- If you do not have an education background, how do you interpret the information you are given about the schools? Do you think you provide real challenge? What kind of questions do you ask? What happens if you are not you happy with the answers you get?
- There are concerns that with appointed MAT boards, rather than elected, there is a ‘democratic deficit’, and that governance is now rule by the most knowledgeable – epistocracy, in order for everything to run smoothly. Do you think there is a danger that in the aim to have a consensus about the Trust, you are just appointing like-minded people, thus avoiding awkward questions and real debate?

Governance

- How do you see the role of the local governing bodies being different from the past? What is its responsibility?
- How will you ensure that local governors always have a voice on the Board of Directors, no matter how large the MAT grows?
- What about the voice of the parents?
- With this, are questions about inclusion or not of local figures, parents, local councillors or other citizens. What sort of voice do they have on the trust? Are you happy with this?
- A Principal I interviewed said that the role of the traditional governor is now ‘diminished’, almost to the point where governors are probably wondering why they’re even there anymore. A governor told me that they just feel like ‘observers’ now, with their responsibility, accountability and decision-making greatly reduced. Can you comment on that?

Legitimacy

- How do you think you maintain legitimacy to all your stakeholders? I.e., how can parents, children, school staff, and other members of the community trust that you will make the right decisions?
- How will you ensure that you are working on behalf of all these communities?

Growing and evolving

- How do you think, or hope, the Trust will evolve?

- Thinking of succession planning for the CEO: what type of person do you think the CEO should be? When [CEO] leaves, do you envisage any changes to the model of leadership you currently have? Is it important to have an educator at the top? Education vs business expertise and skills?
- What would you say are the Trust's values? How can you tell if a school considering joining Pastures New holds the same values as the trust? Is it important is it that you only have schools joining you with the same values as the MAT, and what are these values? Is there room for conflicting values?
- What type of schools would you like to see joining? Geographical area? Primary/Secondary? Different faiths? Something very different?
- Do you think there might be a temptation to stick with schools which have good results and good OFSTED results, so as not to bring down the overall performance and reputation of the MAT?
- If it gets much bigger, how do you think your own role, the Trust Board, and the overall running of the MAT will have to change?

Myths?

- There have been generally two camps when it comes to opinions on academies and MATs: either they are wonderful, give freedom to schools and HTs, are efficient, raise standards, etc, etc. The other side is that they are undemocratic, in that the LA is no longer involved, and they are operating under a business model and with business values, when education shouldn't be about that. What would your take on that be?

APPENDIX 4b

Example of Interview Schedule for CEO (Phase 1)

(Interview with CEO at Pastures New)

How you got to where you are now

- Can you tell me a little bit about what brought you into teaching, what were/and are your ambitions?
- What excites and inspires you? Highs and lows?
- Ideology on education?
- What kind of leader would you like to see yourself as?

Your own role and personal values

- How do you think becoming a CEO of the MAT has affected your own identity as a professional?
- What sort of impact has it had on your relationship with people involved in the schools, and the wider education community?
- What are your most important alliances and contacts?
- How do you think your staff see you?
- What sort of compromises have you had to make (personal, professional, political)?
- How do you decide what 'the right thing to do' is?
- What has being head of a MAT taught you?
- The move from HT to CEO of a MAT – how different has this been, and has it changed your perspective or ideology on education?

Establishing alliances with schools

- Why did you take on the schools that you did?
- Did you have a consultation process? Results?
- What's in it for you, as CEO of the MAT?
- What's in it for the schools?
- How do you work together, and how do you negotiate relationships, roles, responsibilities and priorities?
- What schools do you see the MAT taking on in the future?
- Are there types of schools a) you'd prefer, and b) not want, and how much choice do you have?
- What sort of choice do the joining schools have?
- How important is proximity and geography within the alliance?

Governance

- Talk me through the governance structure.
- How were these different layers of governance established? Who was involved in this process?
- Roles and accountabilities of the different layers?
- How is communication maintained between the 2 layers?

- Do you see any issues resulting in a change of roles for local governors?
- Some governors on LGBs now regard themselves as 'observers', with very much reduced accountability decision-making at a strategic level. What is your experience?
- Are there, or do you anticipate any tensions, or conflicts of interest between the Trust board and the LGBs?
- What sort of things are negotiated between the MAT and its schools (both at leadership level and governance level), and which are 'non-negotiables'? What sort of things are you happy for schools to do their own things on, and what things do you want to come under the MAT umbrella?
- Do you think there may be a danger that some governors may feel marginalised, because they possess 'lay' and 'tacit' knowledge, rather than hard, professional skills and experience?
- What about tensions between governors, as a result of the professionalization of members? A feeling of superiority/inferiority?

Removal of local democracy?

- There is concern that a 'democratic deficit' is being created with MATs, owing to their lack of LA elected councillors, and more local voice on LGBs and Trust Boards. How does your Trust try to address this?

Taking charge of your own destiny?

- One of the key drivers behind academies, is that it would give schools extra freedoms, flexibility, ridding them of LA constraints. Can you comment on this, in your case?
- How far do you think the academies system encourages 'winners' and 'losers'?
- A HT in previous research said that 'if you are not politically savvy, or not sure what is happening at either local or national level, then the power a HT held is put under threat'. Do you agree with this?

The future

- What do you envisage for the Trust in a) 2 years' time, b) 5 years' time?

APPENDIX 4c

Example of Interview Schedule for Local Governors (Phase 1)

(Interview with Hill Top Academy Local Governing Body (Chalkdown))

Governance

1. What voice do each of you have in the running of the school/school-life?
2. Talk me through how your role was affected by the change of academy sponsor.
3. What has been the biggest impact on Hill Top since the change of sponsor?
4. What are the different roles and responsibilities of the Hill Top Local Governing Body and the MAT Trust Board?
5. Are there any conflicts of interest between the two layers of governance?
6. How far do you *negotiate* such things as governance and accountability?

Accountability

7. What are your impressions on the degree of transparency of accountability here, and with the MAT? Who knows what is going on, and do you think that is appropriate? Are there any issues which you would like to see discussed more openly?
8. How far do you think Chalkdown should be accountable or answerable to the local stakeholders in the individual schools? With regards to Hill Top, (and Vale Grove and Forest Row), how far do you think they are?

Involvement of the local community and parents

9. One of the Government's statements in the 2016 White Paper was that the Academies Programme was about 'empowering local communities, putting children and parents first' (p153).

What does that mean to you?

Being an academy as opposed to being part of the L.A. system

10. There is a lot of talk about academies giving school leaders 'freedoms': what freedoms do you think you have as an academy, which you wouldn't have had before?
11. What is the role of the L.A. in Hill Top Academy now?

Being part of a MAT

12. What do you perceive to be the advantages and disadvantages of working within the Chalkdown MAT? For the school as a whole, for other schools, for the community?
13. How far do you envisage Hill Top working with the other schools in the MAT? Would you ever imagine a sense of hierarchy?
14. Is working with the MAT a two-way process? For example, Hill Top contributing to the MAT, as well as the MAT doing things for Hill Top? Collaboration or a sense of 'being done to'?
15. Some involved in education are concerned about the workforce being 'corporatized' when schools join a MAT? What would you say about that?

16. Advantages of having Hill Top and Vale Grove in the MAT? [suggestion of a 'hub' from the staff interviews].

Identity and autonomy

17. What would you say was Hill Top's unique identity? Vision? How is this shared amongst staff, pupils and parents? Is this different now, under the new MAT, compared to when the sponsor was [local College]? What might have accounted for these changes?
18. Given that Chalkdown has several schools, and will have its own vision for the MAT, how far do you think that the unique Hill Top identity or autonomy can be maintained, within the new MAT structure? What needs to happen to ensure that it does? Any concerns?
19. What are the implications for leadership, in terms of agency and autonomy?
20. It has been suggested that smaller MATs are preferable to either single sponsors or much larger MATs, in terms of being able to offer school-to-school support, and conveying their central 'theme'. How far do you agree with this, in relation to Chalkdown? What do you perceive to be Chalkdown's core 'theme'?
21. If Chalkdown grows, how might this affect Hill Top? Would you have any concerns? What would you like to see?
22. How do the roles of Executive Principal and CEO fit into your idea of how the school should be run?

APPENDIX 4d

Example of Interview Schedule with Executive Principal (Phase 1)

(Interview with Executive Principal of Chalkdown Primaries)

Background and motivation to take up the post

- What is your role and responsibility?
- Could you give me a bit of background as to how you came to be in this post?
- Your motivation to take up the post?
- What were you doing before this?
- What were the biggest challenges you faced on your arrival?
- Immediate and longer-term priorities?

Relationship with heads of school/negotiating responsibilities

- Describe your relationship with the heads of schools at Vale Grove and Forest Row? What about between them?
- What is your responsibility, and what is theirs?
- What sorts of areas are not open to negotiation, and what are?
- What are the decisions you make? What are you accountable for?
- Is there anything you wish you had more responsibility for, more in your control?
- Are you frustrated by not being able to make certain decisions? Are there things you would rather NOT have responsibility for?

Relationship with MAT

- How do **you** fit into the bigger Chalkdown MAT picture?
- Relationship with CEO?
- Negotiables and non-negotiables?
- How do you work with the other school leaders in the MAT?
- Benefits of being in a MAT?
- Drawbacks?
- Thoughts on new schools joining the MAT?

Values and ethos

- What do you want for these two schools?
- How does that fit into the overarching MAT set of values and ethos? Is there ever, or can you anticipate any tension over disagreements on this?
- What about alignment of ethos with the 2 schools?

Governance

- How are decisions made in terms of governance for the 2 schools? Is there an overarching governance structure for the 2 schools, or 2 separate governing bodies?
- What role does the Trust Board have in the schools' governance?
- How are decisions and ideas communicated between the trust board, governors and staff? Are there ever any tensions or problems?

Parents

- What were parents' reaction to a) the change of status to academy, b) change of name, and c) change of leadership in the schools?
- Channels of communication?
- Do they understand the new governance structure, and do you think it makes any difference to them?

APPENDIX 4e

Example of Interview Schedule with Academy Principals (Phase 1)

(Interview with Principals at Heron Trust)

Background and motivation to take up the post

- Could you give me a bit of background as to how you came to be in this post?
- What is your role and responsibility?
- Your motivation to take up the post?
- What were you doing before this?
- What were the biggest challenges you faced on your arrival?
- Immediate and longer-term priorities?

Relationship with each other /negotiating responsibilities with the CEO

- How do **you** fit into the bigger Heron Trust?
- How do you three work together?
- Where do you go for your main support and discussion of ideas?
- Networks?
- What is your responsibility, and what is [CEO's]?
- Describe your relationship with the CEO.
- What sorts of areas are not open to negotiation, and what are?
- What are the decisions you make? What are you accountable for? Is there anything you wish you had more responsibility for, more in your control? Are you frustrated by not being able to make certain decisions? Are there things you would rather NOT have responsibility for?
- How much personal autonomy do you think you have? Are there things which you think a head should be responsible for, which you are not, because of being part of a MAT?
- Benefits of being in a MAT – for you personally, and for the school?
- Drawbacks?
- Thoughts on new schools joining the MAT?

Values and ethos

- What do you want for your school?
- How does that fit into the overarching MAT set of values and ethos? Is there ever, or can you anticipate any tension over disagreements on this?
- What about alignment of ethos with the 3 schools?

Governance

- What do you see as the role of the LGB of each of your schools?
- What about the Trust Board?
- Where do you each fit into the governance picture?
- How are decisions and ideas communicated between the trust board, governors and staff? Are there ever any tensions or problems?
- How far does the LGB have an interest in local, community issues?

Parents

- Channels of communication?
- Do they understand the new governance structure, and do you think it makes any difference to them?

APPENDIX 4f

Example of Interview Schedule with Class Teachers (Phase 1)

(Interview with Hazeldene Teaching Staff)

Roles and Governance

1. What part do each of you have in the running of the school/school-life?
2. Talk me through how your role has been affected by Hazeldene becoming an academy.
3. What has been the biggest impact on Hazeldene since the change of status?
4. Are any of you a governor?
5. What do you understand to be the different roles and responsibilities of the Local Governing Body, the Trust Board and the Members?
6. Do you notice, or envisage any conflicts of interest between these various layers of governance?
7. What type of contact do you have with these groups of governance? Are any of you on the LGB or Trust?
8. How do you convey any concerns you may have to the Trust? What about if your concerns were *about* the Trust?
9. How clear are you about the new roles and responsibilities (of staff, governors, parent involvement) in the new structure?

Being an academy as opposed to being part of the L.A. system

10. There is a lot of talk about academies giving school leaders 'freedoms': what freedoms do you think you have as an academy, which you didn't have before?
11. Have you, or do you envisage any constraints?
12. How have you, and other staff been affected by this?
13. Parents? Children?
14. I notice that no-one responded to the consultation process. Why do you think that was? Did you have any questions you'd wished you'd asked?

Accountability

15. What are your impressions on the degree of transparency of accountability within the Trust structures? Who knows what is going on, and do you think that is appropriate? Are there any issues which you would like to see discussed more openly across the layers of governance?
16. How do you think any of this might change when new schools are taken on?
17. How do you envisage Hazeldene Special School working with the new Free school, in terms of governance and accountabilities?
18. What will your roles be in connection with the Free school?

Involvement of the local community and parents

19. One of the Government's statements in the 2016 White Paper was that the Academies Programme was about '*empowering local communities, putting children and parents first*' (p153). What does that mean to you? How far do you think this is true for Hazeldene? Do things need to change?

20. What would happen if the MAT took on schools outside this geographical area? Would it make a difference to the identity of Hazeldene? What about the parents' views of having a MAT relatively far away from the school?

Being part of a MAT

21. If and when, the academy takes on new schools, what do you perceive to be the advantages and disadvantages of working within a MAT?
22. What type of schools would you like to see joining you? Are there any schools you wouldn't want to be part of the MAT? What influence do you think staff or parents might have on this?
23. What do you think would happen if you were asked to take on a school which was under-performing? How might this affect the MAT?
24. How do you see the schools working together, and with the Trust? What about teacher-to-teacher support?
25. Some involved in education are concerned about the workforce being 'corporatized' when schools join a MAT: even the roles have a business-like sound (CEO, for example). What would you say about that? How do the roles of Executive Principal and CEO fit into your idea of how the school should be run?

Identity and autonomy

26. What are Hazeldene's core values? How far does everyone share these – staff, pupils, parents, governors?
27. Given that the Hazeldene MAT will have an over-arching mission statement, and set of values, how far do you think that individual schools should have their own set of values, and personal ethos?
28. What are the implications for leadership, in terms of agency and autonomy?
29. It has been suggested that smaller MATs are preferable to either single sponsors or much larger MATs, in terms of being able to offer school-to-school support, and conveying their central 'theme'. How far do you agree with this, in relation to Hazeldene Trust?
30. If the MAT grows, how might this affect the way values and ideas are shared? Would you have any concerns? What would you like to see?

The future

31. Describe to me what Hazeldene Trust will look like in 2/5 years' time.
32. How far do you think your roles might have changed and evolved?
33. What will be better, and what maybe worse?

APPENDIX 4g

Example of Interview Schedule with Support Staff (Phase 1)

(Interview with Hazeldene Support Staff)

Roles and Governance

1. What part do each of you have in the running of the school/school-life?
2. Talk me through how your role has been affected by Hazeldene becoming an academy.
3. What has been the biggest impact on Hazeldene since the change of status?
4. What do you understand to be the different roles and responsibilities of the Local Governing Body, the Trust Board and the Members?
5. Do you notice, or envisage any conflicts of interest between these various layers of governance?
6. What type of contact do you have with these different groups of governance?
7. How do you convey any concerns you may have to the Trust? What about if your concerns were *about* the Trust?

Being an academy as opposed to being part of the L.A. system

8. I notice that no-one responded to the consultation process. Why do you think that was?
9. There is a lot of talk about academies giving school leaders 'freedoms': what freedoms do you think you have as an academy, which you didn't have before?
10. Have you, or do you envisage any constraints? Any frustrations?
11. How have you, and other staff been affected by this?

Accountability

12. What are your impressions on the degree of transparency of accountability within the Trust structures? Who knows what is going on, and do you think that is appropriate? Are there any issues which you would like to see discussed more openly across the layers of governance?
13. How do you think any of this might change when new schools are taken on?
14. How do you envisage Hazeldene Special School working with the new Free School, in terms of governance and accountabilities?
15. What will your roles be in connection with the Free school?

Involvement of the local community and parents

16. One of the Government's statements in the 2016 White Paper was that the Academies Programme was about '*empowering local communities, putting children and parents first*' (p153).

What does that mean to you? How far do you think this is true for Hazeldene? Do things need to change?

17. What would happen if the MAT took on schools outside this geographical area? Would it make a difference to the identity of Hazeldene? What about the parents' views of having a MAT removed from the school?

Being part of a MAT

18. If and when, the academy takes on new schools, what do you perceive to be the advantages and disadvantages of working within a MAT?
19. How might your roles change?
20. What type of schools would you like to see joining you? Are there any schools you wouldn't want to be part of the MAT? Would you like to see all schools being Special Schools?
21. How do you see the schools and staff working together?
22. Some involved in education are concerned about the workforce being 'corporatized' when schools join a MAT: even the roles have a business-like sound (CEO, for example). What would you say about that?

Identity and autonomy

23. Given that the Hazeldene MAT will have an over-arching mission statement, and set of values, how far do you think that individual schools should have their own set of values, and personal ethos?
24. It has been suggested that smaller MATs are preferable to either single sponsors or much larger MATs, in terms of being able to offer school-to-school support, and conveying their central 'theme'. How far do you agree with this, in relation to Hazeldene?
25. If the MAT grows, how might this affect the way values and ideas are shared? Would you have any concerns? What would you like to see?
26. How do the roles of Executive Principal and CEO fit into your idea of how the school should be run?

The future

27. Describe to me what Hazeldene will look like in 2/5 years' time.
28. How far do you think your roles might have changed and evolved?
29. What would you like to stay the same, and what would you like to have changed?

APPENDIX 4h

Example of Interview Schedule with Parents (Phase 1)

(Interview with parents at Hill Top Academy, Chalkdown)

Contact/engagement with the school

1. One of the Government's statements in the White Paper was that the Academies Programme was about 'empowering local communities, putting children and parents first' (p153).

What is the involvement you have with the school?

Would you regard yourselves as being 'the local community'? Who else, besides parents, might this involve?

Do you feel 'empowered'? What would this mean for you?

Would you like to be more involved? On what issues?

2. The government, and schools, often talk about 'having a voice'/giving stakeholders a voice'. What is your experience of this - how far would you say that parents here, 'have a voice'?
3. What could be done to have your voice, views, opinions, etc, listened to more?
4. What issues are most important to you, and to other parents?
5. Who do parents tend to have most contact with – support staff/pastoral staff/teachers/senior leaders/the Principal? Are you happy with this, or would you like greater engagement (with others)?

Governance

6. Are any of you on the Local Governing Body? [One parent was, and these questions were then directed at him] What would you say your role was? How far does the LGB represent the interests of those involved in Hill Top? What is the relationship you have with the Chalkdown Trust Board? Any contact? Would you like there to be (more)? Are there any issues of disagreement or conflict? What training do you have?
7. Do you think parents should be on governing bodies (there was a move to drop this requirement, but the government seems to have backed down after criticism)?
8. What kind people, qualities or skills do you think a LGB should have?

New Principal

9. What impact and changes have you seen since the new principal, was in post?
10. Is this what Hill Top needed?
11. What is still needed?

New sponsor

12. How did you feel when you heard that X College were withdrawing as sponsors? [letter sent to parents April 2016]
13. Were you involved in any consultation process about Hill Top moving from a single academy to a multi-academy sponsor?

14. Did you have any say in the selection of the new sponsor?
15. Did you receive any correspondence from the Regional Schools Commissioner for this area?
16. What do you think about the new sponsor, Chalkdown?
17. Do you have any thoughts/concerns about them not being locally-based? Do you think that makes any difference to how local issues, those directly concerning Hill Top, will be addressed?
18. What changes have you seen since Chalkdown took over?
19. Do you, as parents, have any contact with the MAT staff?
20. Who do you see as having overall accountability – the MAT, or Hill Top? Or are they accountable for different things?
21. If you had any concerns about how the school was being run, who would you go to?

Identity and autonomy

22. How would you describe Hill Top's unique identity –what's special about it?
23. What are its core values? How far does everyone share these – staff, pupils, parents, governors?
24. Have you seen any difference in Hill Top's identity since the change of sponsor?
25. Given that the new MAT has 7 schools, and may have more in the future, do you have any thoughts or concerns about Hill Top keeping its own vision/identity?
26. What are your thoughts about further schools joining the MAT?
27. Are there any concerns about 'corporatization', schools coming under one 'brand', and smoothing out the differences between schools?
28. What do you think Hill Top would need to do to maintain its own autonomy?
29. What do you see as the future for Hill Top? What would you LIKE it to be?

APPENDIX 5a

Phase 2: Feedback of preliminary findings, with questions, to senior MAT figures at Hazeldene, February 2020.

During Phase 2 of the research, I conducted a second interview at Hazeldene, comprising trustees, CEO, new Deputy-CEO and some Directors. This interview was used to follow-up issues some individuals at this site had raised in Phase 1, and also to explore issues arising from interviews at other research sites in Phase 1.

Situation with [the new Free school]?

Transparency over roles and responsibilities

When I was last here, not all staff were clear who the trustees were, if x was Chair of the Trust Board or LGB, and the fact that x was on both the LGB and the Trust Board.

Q: is there more clarity and greater understanding about the role of the trustees, as opposed to governors? How have you tried to address this with staff and parents?

Communication between trust board, LGB, staff and parents

One member of staff had criticised the poor communication between the Board and the staff, and there was a danger of them not feeling valued. Can you explain how you have approached lines of communication between the different levels of governance, and with the staff?

Business vs education values

There was acknowledgement that the MAT was a business, and had to be managed as such. However, there were a couple of worries about this. First, that the business values of the MAT would take precedence over education, with compromises having to be made to be financially viable. Second, that the management of the MAT would be more remote than that of the original school, and so make it difficult to raise issues. What would you say to those worries?

CEO succession planning

Have you thought about what type of person would replace [CEO]? What skills, qualities and expertise would you be looking for? Someone from another research site described their CEO as the jewel in the crown – the whole MAT had been her idea, and built on her reputation (mention the business vs education figures discussed in the findings).

Taking on other schools

There were many emotions and views about this. Positives included 'spreading the 'special' expertise'; helping Tollston's children to be more tolerant of disabilities; training up teachers from mainstream schools. But there were concerns that taking on a mainstream school in particular, could 'dilute' the provision – staff wouldn't have the same amount of time to devote to Hazeldene, as they would be supporting and working across schools. There was also a worry about 'dilution of values', leading to a change in identity for Hazeldene. What are your thoughts on this? How do you enable the voices and views of those with concerns to be expressed and heard, and taken seriously?

'Stressing at the edges' linked to the above, was the worry of a MAT trying to be too ambitious, over-stretching itself, and not necessarily having the expertise to support the schools it took on. This was linked to a caution to only evolve slowly. Would you say this is how you have progressed? Your thoughts?

'Building a bridge' with joining schools'

One of you used this phrase to describe the approach to the new relationship you would need to build with joining schools, being mindful of senior staff losing some autonomy, and having to take on the systems, organisation and requirements of the MAT. Can you tell me what the process was like, in this respect, in the run-up to [2nd school] joining, and subsequent working with them?

Maintaining control/Reduced autonomy – is there a concept for you of 'earned autonomy' where joining school leaders and governors have to prove responsibility with any autonomy? How do you think this has an impact on their professional agency?

The difference between having long-established relationships and starting from scratch?

Before, you talked about the importance of the close relationships you all had - staff/governors/some of the new trustees. How has this been different with [2nd school], and what have you had to be mindful of, when forming new relationships?

School leaders and other staff working together across the 2 schools – how has this been?

Marginalisation of local voices

One of the big concerns across most of the sites, was the reduced role for local governors: accountability now really lies with the Trust Board. Some governors felt they just had an 'observing' role – rubber-stamping actions put forward by the Principal/HT, but no role or time to scrutinize papers or decisions. Some parents were not sure if they would want to be involved as governors, if they didn't have the power to make major decisions. How has the MAT approached this?

Legitimacy of the MAT

Linked to this, is the perception of the legitimacy of the MAT. While a Trust Board is seeking trustees (and members to some extent) with business, financial, HR and legal skills – 'hard' skills, there can sometimes only be one trustee with an education background, other than the CEO. Local figures, including parents and local authority councillors, who could bring knowledge of the community or awareness of the school are not as prominent as they were in the past, thus prompting the concern for a 'deficit of knowledge' by the Trust Board about the individual schools. This could have implications for how legitimate a MAT is perceived to be, as first and foremost, a provider of education to the community. How would you defend Hazeldene's claim to be a legitimate education enterprise?

Any other comments?

APPENDIX 5b

Phase 2: Feedback of preliminary findings, with questions, to Hill Top LAB – October 2019

The Executive Principal (EP) and LAB of Hill Top had asked for preliminary findings from the research, and I prepared this document for that purpose. I had intended to meet first with the EP and then with the LAB. However, the EP was not available, so I just met with the LAB. I either read out or summarised each of the points, following it up with questions. The session became quite fluid, as participants picked up on various points, and we were later joined by the Chair of the LAB, who had not been present in the Phase 1 interview.

1. Support and challenge given by the MAT

The MATs were trusted to give relevant support because of their track- record in school improvement, being part of a Teaching School Alliance, CEOs being an NLE, and their more recent experience running schools as a MAT. There was a feeling that in order for the MATs to be successful and to grow, the ‘best from every school’ had to be taken and ‘put back into where it’s not best everywhere else’. School improvement was seen to be ‘on tap’, and could be tailor-made to the needs of each of its schools. However, the perceived quality of leadership in a school was a factor in the MAT determining the type of support needed: where the leadership was identified as weak, they had little input into the type of support that was given.

School leaders valued the expertise from the central MAT office and the CEO: ‘*she’ll tell me when I’m wrong, she’ll tell me when I’m right; she’ll challenge, support, intervene*’. There was acknowledgement that the MAT staff knew the journey of each school, and so gave regular, focused support to school heads. Teachers and school leaders were very positive about colleagues from across the MAT working together with them on school improvement: ‘*very powerful, a great group of teachers*’.

Q: Should ALL school leaders have input into the type of support their school received, regardless of past reputation?

2. Professionalization of governance

Trust Boards sought non-executive directors with either generic director skills - ‘*very senior – leaders, directors or managers within the larger companies that they’ve worked for*’; or people with more specific skills in finance, HR or law. All Boards had at least one trustee with an education background.

Some trustees expressed concern about their board’s lack of knowledge of its individual schools, and admitted that not all trustees had sufficient understanding of educational issues. There was an awareness that their own lack of knowledge of schools and education might compromise their ability to make informed challenges, and that a less scrupulous CEO, ‘*could try to pull the wool over our eyes*’.

This could have serious implications for the enactment of trustees’ responsibilities and powers. Trustees are involved in high-level decision-making and accountable for the whole MAT, as well as holding the CEO to account. If there was the possibility that, because of the trustees’ lack of

educational expertise, the CEO could present information to them for which they were not qualified to be true scrutineers, then there is a question over the basis on which important decisions about the children's education were being made. Trustees made a plea for training:

'we desperately need training for new non-executive directors, coming into education, because we may have all the business skills in the world, but it's a different world, it's a different language' .

However, there was seen to be a role for non-experts on trust boards, who might ask questions that provoke new thinking and exercise the CEO to think of clear ways of explaining what the schools are doing: *we're looking at it from a different way[...] and it can sometimes set off a debate then. So I think there is a balance to be had [with education skills].*

Q: This raises issues about the balance of business/education skills within the non-executive directors on a trust board. Should a MAT's academies have an input in who makes up the trust board?

3. Trust in the current CEO, and consideration for succession planning

The current CEOs' experience, skills and status within the world of education gave the MAT credibility and they were *trusted* to do a good job: each one was spoken very highly of by participants. The CEOs in turn, gave autonomy to school leaders, where it was clear they could be trusted with this (see section on 'Autonomy'). However, there was no clear consensus over the skills and background valued for the role of CEO. The business model of the MAT demands that the skills related to running an organisation – finance, HR, legal – are vital, and without these, the MAT would not function. On the other hand, the 'business' of these MATs is education, and as such, it is considered important that the Trust Board has representatives whose skills and expertise are embedded in education. There was the suggestion that the role did not need someone from the world of education, so long as there was a 'deputy' with education expertise. For some participants, if business values took precedence, then this would raise questions about the MAT's legitimacy as an education provider.

Q: What kind of CEO would you like to see in the future, and who should be involved in this decision? What might be the implications for academies if an 'educator' was not at the top?

4. Perceived legitimacy of the trust

It will be increasingly important for the legitimacy of trust boards to demonstrate to their community that they can embody both the values of education and business in a way which benefits the students most, and that they can engage in 'participative accountability'. Boards need to convince their stakeholders that the people creating those values and shaping the MAT's mission, are trusted individuals who are making decisions from a position of educational experience and authority. Parents were concerned that if they had a problem, they would come up against the 'business': *'my worry would be if you did have a problem, you'd have to fight the business'*.

Q: How can a MAT show its community that it is a 'legitimate' body, making decisions from a position of educational experience and authority?

5. Shared values

Each MAT expected all its academies to share its values, and that the enactment of these was the responsibility of the Exec Principal/HoS, through the staff and LABs/LGBs. The preference is to have any joining schools already holding the MATs values. Individual academies evidently put their own 'take' on these values, and adapt them to suit their own school community. There was a question over how much individual members of SLT actually felt they *owned* the values, and how much they believed in them, or whether or not some might be going through the motions.

Q: If the MAT's values are a reflection of the vision, skills and expertise of the Trust Board, what is the impact when trustees change or the CEO leaves? Is there ever a conflict of MAT and local values, of a school head's own vision, and is there room for negotiation on this?

6. Communicating changes in lines of accountability (governance and school management) to all concerned.

Setting clear boundaries and expectations for MAT-level and school-level responsibilities was a vital element in school leaders understanding lines of accountability and any change in their status. School leaders valued clear policies and processes being applied by the MAT 'correctly, appropriately and rigorously', meaning everyone knew what to do, and 'everyone's held to account with it'.

Everyone recognised the importance of keeping the lines of communication open with parents, and some schools had organised various events to inform parents of the changes in MAT status or sponsorship, or had been working on ways to enhance parental involvement. However, it was not always clear if parents were aware of the changes to the role of local governors, and their diminished powers, and governors felt that parents '*needed to know*'.

Q: Is there sufficient clarity over new lines of accountability in both management and governance? How important is it that parents are made aware of changes to lines of accountability due to MAT status?

7. Reduction of locally democratic processes

With the change in the processes of local governance, there has been a marked reduction in the amount of power and accountability members of the LABs/LGBs now have. In some cases, local councillors appeared to have left because they no longer had any authority in governance: "*I don't want to be in a position where I'm a councillor and I don't have any powers*". With this, there was a concern that the LAB/LGB had lost, or could lose, education expertise and knowledge of policy at a local level. There were some concerns over the representation of the LABs/LGBs, and indeed the trust boards, given the school and community populations.

MATs were aware that some local governors would be unhappy with their reduced accountability and responsibility, which was now at Trust level. Some LAB/LGB members described themselves as 'observers', being 'reduced', rather than scrutineers and challengers, with the sense that at LAB/LGB meetings, it was 'pseudo scrutiny': '*there's not enough time to fully scrutinise from a quality perspective, it's reduced, compared with its previous incarnation*'.

With this reduction in meaningful local scrutiny, monitoring and accountability, the LABs/LGBs were moving to a role of advisor to the Principal. Furthermore, they were reliant on what the Principal gave them at the LAB meeting, rather than being able to independently hold the Principal to account. This could have implications for local governors' sense of identity and purpose, as they saw their role as *'less significant in terms of [...] influence, and more of a 'rubber stamp'*. The governors at several MATs were not sure that all parents realised the diminished powers of the LABs/LGBs, and thought they should be informed, so that they understood the different levels of responsibility between the Trust Board and LAB/LGB. Some school leaders were also not sure if governors themselves were aware of their new, limited role: *'perhaps they haven't all got the awareness of...they're all diminished'*.

Linked to this is the question over who holds the (Exec) Principal to account. Some believed it was the LAB who held the Principal to account, whilst others thought it was the Trust Board.

In some of the MATs, there appeared to be top-down governance, with no local representation or local knowledge and expertise feeding directly into the Trust Board. Creating Link Trustees had been suggested to enable trustees to have a greater connection with academies. However, this could be seen as an information-gaining exercise on the part of the trust board. In an attempt to develop a more meaningful two-way communication flow between the school and trust layers of governance, there was a suggestion from one participant that a member of the LABs and/or each of the school Principals attend the Trust Board meetings regularly (to be 'accountable to the bottom'). In order for this to go beyond observer role, and to give a meaningful voice to local issues, this would necessitate a move by the Trust Board to give decision-making powers to LAB members. This is seriously being considered in at least one of the research sites.

Q: What has been the impact of having Link Trustees, where these have been set up?

Thoughts on a more 'bottom-up' flow of governance and communication, with real decision-making powers at local level?

How can schools be supported by local education knowledge and expertise?

If the Trust expect the LAB/LGB to hold the Principal to account, how it can do this, with greatly reduced powers of governance?

8. Autonomy of individual schools and school leaders

School leaders felt that their MAT did not have a 'stamp', insisting on doing things in a particular way. Depending on the school, leaders reported to varying degrees that the CEO gave them 'freedom and autonomy', and that they had some agency to build their own school identity. The degree of autonomy tended to depend on what position the school was in. Whilst the message that for the MAT model to work, it needed to be 'driven by the schools', more direction was needed for schools with a history of under-performance.

This led to the concept of 'earned autonomy', where schools, leaders and governors demonstrating responsibility with autonomy would be rewarded with more freedom, but such

freedoms would be taken away where a lack of responsibility was evident, as illustrated by this CEO:

'if you can't prove you can be responsible, then we have to take the responsibility off you, cos otherwise the whole place becomes totally vulnerable'

The shift in the balance of power from CEO to school leader would occur once the CEO felt confident in the school leader's ability to show 'responsibility'. How other school leaders viewed such a leader is likely to have been affected by such treatment.

Q: What are your thoughts and experiences of this?

9. When central/local priorities clash and locus of control is shifted: the importance of negotiation

Whilst some school leaders agreed that their MAT had driven their schools', 'much further and faster' than they could have achieved on their own, there was some evidence of the MAT central control having an impact on school leaders' sense of agency and autonomy, especially amongst those who had been head of their own school. Such control had felt restricting, or signalled a clash of priorities, resulting in a sense of 'over-kill', and regret at the reduced autonomy: *'I'm not my own boss anymore'*. The situation appeared to have been resolved through discussion and negotiation between the school leader and CEO, resulting in greater understanding of each other's demands and priorities, at which point a compromise could be reached. There was also evidence that this situation had been improved by the MATs relaxing their 'one-size fits all' model.

Q for 8 & 9: Do school leaders feel confident to raise concerns about their reduced autonomy and clash of priorities?

Is there the capacity for leaders to negotiate their role in relation to maintaining/gaining agency?

10. Expansion of the MAT

This issue is linked to the research questions, as it may have implications for individual school principals and heads, and their school's connection and links with the MAT. It is also likely to have implications for lines of accountability and governance oversight. During the interviewing period, Chalkdown grew from 8 settings to 12. At the beginning of the research, the small size of the MAT was considered an asset, as they could be clearer with their schools about the central theme, and 'get the message out quickly to all the schools'. A larger MAT might lead to frustration because of the length of time some processes would take, and the number of schools involved for decision-making. Other concerns were raised by the other MATs, but more as a hypothesis, as they were still relatively small or new. These concerns about the rapid expansion referred to insufficient infrastructure and resources; the demands made by individual schools, and the impact on the others; not enough trustees to oversee effective governance; difficulties in communication.

Q: What is the rationale for expanding the MAT, and who is involved in those decisions?

What would be considered 'legitimate concerns' with rapid expansion?

APPENDIX 6

Stage 1 of data analysis: initial colour-coding to identify themes through different interviews at Hazeldene. Excerpt from 25-page document

Colour Trust Board Parents Exec Principal

9. Identity (see also 7 – ‘Negotiating and building relationships’)

For Headteachers becoming Heads of School (a demotion?), and new lines of management above them.

Suggestion of framing a reduction in HT’s autonomy as ‘removing the hassle factor’ (trust chair)

New role and ‘identity’ for HTs becoming CEOs?

Trust Chair: It’s very clear from the guidelines that I’ve read, that when that school joins, that the school [governance] appreciates that the head is being managed by the Principal – the level above – but I would think it would be very good practice that the chair of governors who is dealing with that head on a daily, month-to-month basis, is part of that team which informs on the head’s performance.

Trust Chair: I mean just coming back to your ‘how would a head feel?’, the key learning things I’ve found out from going on conferences is that for a MAT to work and a new school joining, the key thing is that the values have to be the same. So basically if the HT signs into the values that the Trust expresses, they are likely to feel... what you could say is ‘we are supporting you, we are on the same wave-length, and to some extent, although you may be losing some autonomy, we may be taking off you some of the hassle factors which you have to deal with, which allows you to concentrate on some of the things which really motivate you as a HT, which is to do with the education, the classroom, making the school effective in trying to achieve... you won’t have to worry so much in terms of the recruitment, the other stuff, you know... that’s the sort of trade-off really.

Interviewer: Before we finish, I want to ask about identity. What was the identity of Hazeldene, and what do you think about how far schools joining the trust should keep their own identity, and how much should be an over-arching Hazeldene identity?

Parent Y: I think the new school should be joining with Hazeldene. [she talked about the safety issues when her son was at a mainstream school – her son tried to run off, and opened a fire door]. It’s the environment [that has to be safe].

Parent X: I don’t see why each school as they come on board couldn’t keep their identity. I know [Free school] is going to be brand new, so that [might be easier]. But I have seen schools where they’ve joined up, changed the names, but if that were the case, then Hazeldene should change its name too. Because it’s a bit like a take-over, if you say ‘I’m going to take this school on, and it’s called Oakwood, but we’re going to call it ‘Hazeldene’, so I don’t think that’s very fair on the children and parents in that school. I don’t see any problem with having the umbrella of Hazeldene, [so long as each school can keep its own name and identity].

I: there is the suggestion that, particularly with a struggling school, they don’t seem to have as much say...

Parent X: Yes, I can see that. It's a bit like sweeping the past away, doing it like that. There were 2 schools in Tollston near where I live, and there were 2 schools they've had to bring together, and they've used the name of just one of the schools, and for the other school, it's like it just never happened, and that was a struggling school. Which, an outsider looking in, would think, 'Alright, clean start, new school and all that palaver, but then you have to think – those children and those staff that were in that school, is that fair on them, to suddenly have that stripped away from them?

I: It seems as though you want to put forward your identity, a sort of 'Hazeldene identity'?

CEO: Yes, that's right, yea.

I: So would you be able to say at this point, what you think that is?

CEO: No... it's here [taps head]. We've had two sessions, the Members and the Trustees, so it's here and we've done this piece of work about what we want Hazeldene to stand for, and we started, sort of what's it about, and we tried to get the words, and our common cause. So 'mission', our 'common cause' and so the mission statement and the values – we started working on that. And I want to get working on that.

I: So how did that come about? Was it your [about to say governors/trustees etc]...

CEO: ...me.

APPENDIX 7

Example of a Pen Portrait of one of the research sites (Pastures New) during Stage 4 of the analysis.

<u>Pastures New</u>	
Why this MAT was chosen	Pastures Trust is a CofE MAT, which converted from a SAT to a MAT in 2017, with a total of two schools, so at the beginning of their MAT journey, with a diocesan steer.
My own interest in this site	In the same borough as Hazeldene and some of Chalkdown’s academies (the ones in my study). I know the CEO from when he was HT of the primary school: he has always struck me as being an innovative head, not one to follow the LA party-line. Setting up his own MAT seems quite a natural move, given his standing in the LA, and I was keen to learn how this has played out for him.
School’s reason to be involved in the study	The CEO is very interested in research, and is keen to contribute his experience to my study. He will be interested to know what I’ve learned from the research, and how this can feed into future thinking and practice.
Situation at time of interview with CEO	A 2-school (primary) MAT, but also supporting another local primary school: <i>‘immediately we became a trust we had a phone call from the diocese saying there was a school that had gone into an inadequate judgement, could I provide any school-to-school support, because the head teacher had walked out, and would I consider being the principal sponsor? So, the challenge there, is, what do you say? Do you say “oh well I’ll think about it and get back to you?” and leave the school without a HT, so the natural response is to say ‘yes’. And I’ll do what I can do’.</i> At the point of interview, 12 months after starting the support, the MAT had received no funding from the DfE, which was clearly highly frustrating for the CEO. He had just given the DfE an ultimatum: pay them, or they’d pull out. They are also a Teaching School.
Situation now	Met the CEO by chance on 24.9.18 and he told me that his Trust was collaborating with 2 neighbouring trusts in the borough and were doing some work on literacy. He had mentioned these 2 in the interview, and implied that each of the different trusts would remain responsible or specialists in a certain area (e.g., training NQTs), without treading on each other’s toes. The DfE agreed to the funding for supporting the school he mentioned in his interview. He indicated that he had had a tough time with his governors, although it was not clear what he meant by this. He also mentioned that he had felt very alone, and this seems to be linked to the governors issue. Definitely need to follow this up quite soon [it wasn’t convenient to interview him at this point].
Interviews	May 2018: one interview with CEO. I shall tell him who else I want to speak to, and take it from there. He is aware this could be several months from now, but given the above encounter, I am keen to speak to him about recent developments and his feelings.
<u>Emerging themes</u> The CEO’s background, credentials and motivation The CEO’s background is in education and education leadership. In response to the DfE not giving them funding to support the third school: <i>‘there should have been absolutely no question about it, because, without being arrogant about it, I’ve been a head for 25 years, I’ve</i>	

been an NLE ever since they came into being, I've been a core 1 Teaching School, so 9 years we've been delivery school-to-school support, and with a good track.

The motivation to become an academy was not to be taken over by somebody else, and to keep control:

'the trust is an evolution out of the school, basically – the first stage was to become an academy, not for political reasons, but at that particular time, there was all this fear about people being swallowed up by business, and secondary schools, etc, etc. So I went to the governors, and said, 'look, it's not politically motivated, but we don't want to be swallowed up by somebody – we want to be in control of our destiny if we can be...'. As with Hazeldene, initially, the LA were not supportive, but as their capacity to support schools decreased, with the realisation that it was 'system leaders' who offered 'school-to-school support', their position changed. The diocese 'were very nonchalant about it' – waiting to see what happened.

The CEO's own values are very much to do with equality of opportunity, and creating the right conditions for staff and children to flourish, and these are values he hopes will permeate throughout his MAT, rather than a narrow focus on quick improvements in results: *'it's about the conditions in the organisation: it's nothing about having an outstanding teacher in every classroom [...] it's about making the conditions right for everybody to swim, with the right amount of food, that is what makes a difference'.*

Lack of clarity over sources of funding

There was some confusion over where the funding for supporting the third school should come from, given that this was part of school-to-school support, rather than the start of a sponsorship negotiation. The DfE, LA and the Teaching School Alliance each seemed to think it was the other's responsibility, which resulted in the MAT not being paid. More detail on this in the interview.

Trust structure

There is a CEO, and a HoS for each of the 2 schools. There are no trust officers, and the CEO currently does not have his own office, although this may be resolved by the next interview. This has caused problems in that when he is at his original school, people see him as the HT.

Relationship between the CEO and the individual HTs and its schools

- **'Serving leadership'**

When asked about the danger of appearing to be a 'super-head', with previous autonomous headteachers now having a lower position in the MAT, the CEO challenged the image of hierarchy, in his case. He stressed the importance of developing staff as individuals, and achieving a balance between allowing people to try things out for themselves, even though they might make mistakes, and ensuring they don't go so far as to get into difficulties:

'it's all about serving leadership, it's not about hierarchical position. Because... that never achieves very much. It achieves people who are robotic, and do what they are told, but if you want entrepreneurship, you've got to hand people the opportunity to be responsible. And we're all learning, and we all make mistakes'.

- **Earned autonomy**

Whilst the CEO would not want to 'remove people's autonomy', as he sees the MAT system as one of collaboration and support, it seems that the amount of delegated power and autonomy that he will give to an incoming school will depend on what the school does with that autonomy (or maybe how they are perceived to be able to deal with the responsibility):

'I've given lots of people lots of autonomy. If they show that they can't, that they're not responsible with that, then I might pull it back, for a time, until they learn that they have to be responsible with it'

- **Penalising for being 'inadequate'?**

Linked to the theme of earned autonomy, is the funding system, which is based on contributions from each school, depending on their OFSTED rating, with poorer schools paying more: *'I have a sliding scale top slice, so an outstanding school might pay 3%, and an inadequate school might pay 6%, simply because the needs, and the capacity for the school to run itself are different. So, I'd be expecting an outstanding school to be a contributor and to contribute to other schools, like an inadequate school'*, but evidently not as much. When I put this system to a trustee of another MAT, she described it as 'hitting them when they were down'. The CEO here defends his position as he believes the prospect of contributing less gives poorer schools the motivation to improve, which in turn, earns them more autonomy:

'If I said to a school – which I said to this particular school – that initially it would be 6%, but if you show progress in 2 years' time, it might go to 5 or 4%. Because at the minute what you are saying is that 'you've not got the capacity, but in a few years' time, you might have the capacity, you might be able to manage the budget better, so you can have more of the money. I'm not interested in the money; I'm interested in school improvement. So, for me, it's about improving schools. It gives people the motivation to say 'let's utilise the resource we've got, and let's benefit from it', and then we'll get more of our autonomy back'.

There is a possible contradiction here with what he says about his schools whose results may be poor: *'there's no way that I would pass that any kind of pressure that I feel onto that school, or onto the staff. I just motivate them and support them in every way I can'*. Maybe it depends if he already has a positive relationship with a school, where they have a shared history of working together: perhaps taking on a new school with many unknowns may necessitate a firmer approach.

Support based on a quality assurance model

They used the NCTL's 'Maturity System' to assess the type of support the schools needed (based on how they ran the teaching school), and provided support on the back of the outcomes. The LA were very impressed with the quality and amount of information the Trust collated for the schools, and told the DfE that they didn't get this type of information with big trusts.

Growing and evolving

The school which joined the MAT at the point of the SAT becoming a MAT had been receiving school-to-school support from the original school for several years: *'for them, and their governing body, it just felt a natural thing for them to come into the Trust'*.

CEO has some innovative ideas on what the Trust could do (e.g., working with migrants/refugees in the form of building a hostel residential care and education).

The MAT enabling 'progression' for staff: 'a big staff team'

The CEO is excited about coaching, developing and supporting HTs and other staff, despite only having two academies at present, and sees opportunities for 'placing them' within the Trust.

An alignment of values

Very clear that the values of any joining school should be in line with the trust's: *'I wouldn't want to jump into bed with anybody'*.

Taking on 'unknowns' and meeting external high expectations

Taking on a struggling school brings difficult issues such as having to turn it around in 3 months before OFSTED come back. Also, some of the biggest problems are not obvious when you first take it on, and this is a theme which emerged in Chalkdown. The CEO here says: *'it was just like unpeeling an onion, so every time I looked at something, it unearthed another set of issues, really'*.

And like the primary school in Chalkdown Trust, the good results masked issues of poor management, lack of effective procedures and poor governance.

Networks

The CEO has an Associate Schools Initiative, some of which are connections from before the MAT, and some are new. The focus is varied, from ITE to coaching, to school improvement. The relationship these schools have with the Associate is 'fluid', where schools can come and go and not be 'tied in': *'if somebody works with us for a time, and we benefit from their skills set, and they get something from us, then that's all that matters. It's not really about possessing things, is it?'*

Next steps

Continue to analyse this interview.

Interview the Trust board and members; chair of LGB; HT/HoS of the two schools (and possibly with the 3rd school which is about to join in Sept/Oct 2018; a second interview with CEO as developments seem to have happened since my last interview.

APPENDIX 8: Revised Thematic Map (Stage 6 Of Data Analysis)

