

Examining the competencies required for leadership of multi-academy trusts. Implications for a case study trust

Jonathan Culpin & Trevor Male

To cite this article: Jonathan Culpin & Trevor Male (2022) Examining the competencies required for leadership of multi-academy trusts. Implications for a case study trust, School Leadership & Management, 42:3, 293-308, DOI: [10.1080/13632434.2022.2088491](https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2022.2088491)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2022.2088491>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 24 Jun 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1148




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Examining the competencies required for leadership of multi-academy trusts. Implications for a case study trust

Jonathan Culpin^{a,b} and Trevor Male ^b

^aInstitute of Education Faculty of Policy and Society, Anglian Learning, Cambridge, UK; ^bInstitute of Education, UCL Centre for Educational Leadership, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper examines competencies required for leadership of multi-academy trusts (MATs) to identify the learning experiences needed to make the transition to executive leadership (a concept perceived here as having accountability for multi-part organisations). As part of national government(s) drive to reduce the influence and control of local government over state-funded schools in England policies have been enacted, particularly since 2010, to create academies which were directly answerable to the Secretary of State for Education. Formed as a not-for-profit charitable company, each trust is composed of Members who act as guardians of the governance of the organisation, which is then given strategic direction by a Board of Trustees and executive leadership by a CEO. MATs consist of multiple academies, working to a single trust, and are the organisational model preferred by the Department for Education. In this paper MATs are equated to the concept of loosely-coupled organisations, formed of numerous constituent academies and held together much more loosely than a hierarchical structure would tolerate. Leadership competencies encompassed in the centrally National Professional Qualification for Executive Leadership (NPQEL) are considered inadequate generally and for the case study MAT explored here, leading the trust to introduce additional expectations of future senior leaders.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 March 2022
Accepted 6 June 2022

KEYWORDS

Academies; multi-academy trusts; leadership; competencies

Introduction

The growth and development of state-funded academies in England (including multi academy trusts – MATs) has been one of the most significant changes in education policy in England since the Education Act 1944. Established under the New Labour Government in 2000 with the intention to turn around urban schools deemed to have failed under Local Authority (LA) leadership, the programme drew heavily on the principles of New Public Management which

CONTACT Trevor Male  t.male@ucl.ac.uk

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

emerged in the 1980s as an approach to running public service organisations (Baxter and John 2021). A highly contentious policy, criticised for its perceived neoliberalist basis and with limited evidence for improving outcomes, especially for disadvantaged groups of pupils, academisation was nevertheless accelerated under the Coalition Government 2010–15 (Constantinides 2021a). Expanded now to include schools previously deemed to be good or outstanding ('converter' academies) and not only those judged to require intervention following an Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection, the policy promised freedom to innovate and encouraged greater leadership of the school system by the system (Greany and McGinity 2022).

For a variety of reasons, including the continued absence of some of the promised freedoms and public sector spending restraint forcing schools to consider greater efficiencies, academies increasingly looked to combine their resources and seek safety in numbers, forming into MATs which have come to dominate the education sector. Encouragement for this came from Department for Education:

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. (Department for Education 2016, 57)

By January 2022, there were 9837 academy trusts in England, estimated to be catering for over half the possible school population (National Audit Office 2018). Some 1341 remained as single academy trusts with the rest being incorporated into 1197 MATs ranging in size from two to 41+ academies, free schools, studio schools and university technical colleges. Typically, each MAT had an executive leadership team, working to the board of trustees, headed by a Chief Executive Officer (CEO). In attempts to rationalise the academisation process eight Regional School Commissioners (RSCs) were appointed in 2014, charged with the responsibility to bring coherence to the rapid growth of the academies. The focus of the RSCs work, is overseen by a National Commissioner later appointed in 2016.

The Conservative government (elected 2019) has indicated it will continue with the policy of encouraging all schools to leave the LA maintained sector and find a home in a MAT (Roundtable 2021). The centrality of MATs to government policy can be seen in the restructuring of teacher training and development in England, with the creation in 2020 of 87 teaching school hubs (TSH). Hubs are commissioned to provide professional development to teachers at all stages of their careers and to play a significant role in delivering school based initial teacher training (SCITT), the early career framework (ECF), the specialist and leadership national professional qualifications (NPQs) and, furthermore, to promote professional development to school leaders and teachers (Department for Education 2020). It is noted that only five of the TSHs are not

headed by a MAT. This, we conclude, is a clear sign that the delivery of government policy is to be headed by MATs.

With fears of isomorphism, defined here as the homogenisation and loss of identity of individual schools (Glatter 2022), the size and scale of these growing MATs together with a perceived decline in teacher agency, has led contributors to the field to challenge this policy and highlighted its risks (Greany and McGinity 2022). Furthermore, as the 'founder' Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), (those former headteachers who conceived and led the first MATs) reach retirement, a new generation of skilled and knowledgeable leaders are going to be needed to steer these complex organisations.

The Department for Education (DfE) response to this challenge was to introduce the National Professional Qualification for Executive Leadership (NPQEL), designed to support the professional development of aspiring and serving executive headteachers and multi-academy trust (MAT) chief executive officers (CEOs) (Department for Education 2017). We contend, however, that this does not go far enough to meet the need of the maturing sector, based upon a narrow interpretation of what an effective MAT should look like. Furthermore, NPQEL fails to place sufficient emphasis on the loosely coupled nature of most MATs and the need to develop system thinking in emerging leaders, if they are to enable dynamic learning organisations based upon professional agency (Kools and Stoll 2016). Consequently, in this paper we:

- conceptualise the internal organisation of a MAT to understand and explain the challenges their leaders face;
- identify two of the critical competencies leaders need to address these, and
- explore how this learning can be applied through the lens of an anonymised MAT as it goes through a period of substantial change, in order to make recommendations for the system as a whole.

This contribution is from the perspective of a serving CEO and an academic researcher with a research profile in the study of academy trusts.

The MAT as a loosely coupled system

Formed as a not for profit charitable company, each MAT is composed of Members who act as guardians of the governance of the organisation, which is then given strategic direction by a Board of Trustees and executive leadership by a CEO and central team, the extent of which is dependent upon the size and scale of the MAT (Greany and McGinity 2022). The Trust Board is in a direct contract with the Secretary of State for Education, through centrally determined Articles of Association and Funding Agreements, and is accountable for the delivery of education and financial regularity in each of its constituent academies, while also determining the level of autonomy given to each of its

schools. Conceptualised as ‘hierarchies, markets and networks through regimes of governance or coordinating mechanisms’, the formal structure of MATs replicate much of what can be observed in the corporate world (Greany and Higham 2022, 39).

While this structure implies one of strict hierarchy and organisational alignment within the MAT and its schools, several researchers point to a more complex picture (e.g. Wilkins 2017; Male 2019), a situation summed up by Greany and Higham (2022, 46) as the system’s ‘stratification, commodification and repositioning are creating a series of tensions, pressures and moral dilemmas that leaders face as a result of operating with the self-improving school system’. It is also an environment where the rules and standard operating procedures are still being formed, with one CEO of a MAT described its construction as ‘a train hurtling down the tracks for which we are laying the lines just before we arrive’ (Male 2018, 12) and where others have described the MAT policy as ‘chaotic’ (Greany and McGinity 2021, 312). Most significant, however, is that most MATs are formed of numerous constituent academies and held together on a much looser basis than a hierarchical structure would tolerate. As one contributor to the field has noted, drawing upon research from two established MATs and interviews with executives and school leaders, ‘legitimacy over the organisation may come from different sources dependent upon the nature of the governance model’, as well as the strength of existing networks, history, practices and cultural symbols of the individual institutions (Constantinides 2021a, 10). Although we may argue that the evidence base of only two MATs is limited, these findings are nevertheless supported by Greany and McGinity (2021), who reference 23 MAT case studies when they comment that ‘integrating any new schools into the existing group’s culture and ways of working is a perennial challenge’ for leaders (312).

The theory of loosely coupled organisations (Weick 1976) is helpful in understanding this complexity when conceptualising loose coupling as ‘coupled events that are responsive, but that each event preserves its own identity and some evidence of its physical and logical separateness’ (4). This is a conclusion further developed by Spender and Grinyer (1995) who noted that only when both distinctiveness and responsiveness are displayed, can an organisation be said to be loosely coupled. Although Weick (1976) notes many advantages to loosely coupled systems, such as acting as a sensitive sensing mechanism or enabling localised adaptation, disadvantages can also be identified such as the preservation of archaic traditions which may mitigate against radical reform and which may be required to respond to changes in the environment. Furthermore, local cultural, organisational uniqueness, may reflect the specific context or origins in which the team or institution works and be respected by local stakeholders and nurture excellent practice. These same local idiosyncrasies, however, ‘could forestall the spread of advantageous mutations that exist somewhere in the system’ (Weick 1976, 8).

While organisational theory tends to observe loose or tight coupling through the lens of the corporate, business orientated world, given the fact that a MAT is composed of individual schools, which perceive themselves as semi-autonomous components, this model provides a useful starting point to begin considering the challenges leaders face bringing coherence to this system. One of the causes identified for loosely coupled organisations is geographic spread, as a form of a 'fragmented external environment' (Orton and Weick 1990, 207). This is the case for many MATs which must interact with a far greater number of stakeholders, such as Local Governing Bodies (LGBs) and staff located in different institutions which may be 'widely dispersed geographically which creates considerable challenge for those responsible for setting the strategic direction of the organisation' (Baxter and John 2021, 2). In such an environment, the local institution may retain and indeed reinforce its own culture in competition to that of the more remote 'centre'. The MAT in this sense is not a single actor, but in competition with other member academies, each with their own narrative and moral purpose (Constantinides 2021b). This is a view supported by Glatter (2022) who notes that building a shared narrative is difficult in modern professional organisations where there is an assumption of personal and institutional agency. Cousin and Gu (2022, 193) stress that shared goals are vital to make partnerships work, but which although often presented as 'optimistic, describing partnerships as emergent, participative, power-sharing, is in reality challenged by the realities of implementation'. This is compounded by system leaders 'negotiating tensions in conflicted governance environments, funding models and sustainability, plus tensions between the actors', especially with those who were initially 'converter' academies from 2010 (Cousin and Gu 2022, 193). These schools have formed or joined MATs on the basis of retaining high levels of autonomy which may be at odds with the direction the trust wishes to take, especially as 'good practice' from the DfE (Department for Education 2021) indicates a preference for a 'roll out' standardised approach, as opposed to the more collaborative 'co-design' and 'organic' models of collaboration (Greany and McGinity 2022, 203).

MAT leaders and 'systemness'

When considering these 'converter' dominated MATs as complex, loosely coupled systems, those leading need to apply 'systems thinking' and see themselves as system leaders, even if they lack a formal 'external' sector wide role, such as a National Leader of Education (NLE). (NLEs are deemed by the Department for Education to be outstanding headteachers who use their skills and experience to support schools in challenging circumstances and to deliver school improvement support).

Senge, Hamilton, and Kania (2015), building on the work of Senge (2006), identify three core competencies for system leaders. Firstly, a need to see the

bigger picture which 'enables collaborating organisations to jointly develop solutions, not evident to any of them individually, and to work together for the health of the whole system rather than pursue symptomatic fixes to individual pieces' (14). This is supported by Fullan (2004) who identifies 'systemness' as a core competence, when leaders focus on the bigger picture, their connection to it and what they can learn from it, and also by Williams (2002) when he defines the core competence of 'otherness' – the ability to see the whole landscape. This in turn leads to a second core competence established by Senge, Hamilton, and Kania (2015) for system leaders to foster reflection and generative conversations, in particular for leaders to hear viewpoints other than their own, 'an essential doorway for building trust where distrust had prevailed and for fostering collective creativity' (14). There are also parallels here with the call for more imperfect leadership and a greater emphasis upon an invitational approach (Munby 2022). The third core competence involves moving from reaction to co-creation. For Senge, Hamilton, and Kania (2015) this involves leaders helping people 'articulate their deeper aspirations and build confidence based on tangible accomplishments achieved together'. Furthermore, the authors contend that such an approach is not just about creating inspiring visions and an underlying narrative; Orton and Weick (1990) also stress the need to build a shared, coherent narrative especially in organisations that are loosely coupled, especially when allied with a theory of change (Burke 2014) and moral purpose (Fullan 2020, 117).

Williams (2002) stresses the competence of system leaders in building and sustaining relationships, with emphasis on partnerships that seek to address complex problems in communities – which he refers to as 'wicked' problems. Timmins (2015), albeit referring to system leadership in the National Health Service (NHS), speaks of a need to build a 'coalition of the willing', it being an act of persuasion and that it requires 'a conflicting combination of constancy of purpose and flexibility', while Hargreaves (2010, 15) speaks of the need for 'alliance architecture'. Other researchers, including Burke (2014), place an emphasis on the ability 'to operate within non-hierarchical environments with dispersed configurations of power relationships' (Williams 2002, 106). Cognisance of institutional culture is also key, which can either act as a facilitator for positive change as in 'we share our best ideas' or as a barrier 'we protect each other against external criticism' (Fullan 2020, 2).

In complex systems, under accountability pressures, the temptation, however, may be to impose that narrative, but not always with positive results. Spender and Grinyer (1995, 911), for example, noted that 'while top management have the ability to resolve the contradictions of organisational life', an assumption of the all-powerful system leader ignores the importance of an organisation's origins. In their view, top-down leadership is inadequate and does not stress the role that the creation and sustaining of an organisation's interpretative system can be shared between top management and employees.

Furthermore, they warn against what are described as Stage 1 responses, that in the face of disunity and tension, leaders resort to greater central control over an organisation which may then result in new leadership, which in turn is disruptive and ignorant of the culture of the organisation. The authors contend that such a course of action is rarely a profitable one and the most successful companies – what they term as ‘sharp-bending organisations’ – are those with tightened financial controls, but decentralised marketing and production responsibilities i.e. those closest to the stakeholders (Spender and Grinyer 1995, 919).

The literature on MATs suggests there are parallels in the sector landscape of which leaders need to be aware. Greany and McGinity (2021), for example, contend that the reader should not confuse the operation of MATs with the private sector or the market, arguing that education relies on ‘teacher commitment, skills and professionalism to a degree rare in the private sector, arguably bringing a level of complexity that is not always present in corporate mergers and acquisitions’ (Greany and McGinity 2021, 315). Furthermore, whilst standardisation and alignment in expanding organisations can enhance outcomes and can support new knowledge being created, this wasn’t always automatic in their research findings. Drawing helpfully upon literature from across profit and non-profit organisations, too often leaders did not have regard to ‘socio-cultural issues, such as organisational cultures, trust and affective responses to change among staff, alongside the integration of structures, systems and processes’ (Greany and McGinity 2021, 317). Constantinides (2021a, 21) also sounds a note of caution, taking a much more critical view of MATs when he describes a move to greater centralisation in one trust to improve outcomes. Tensions became evident in the MAT at this perceived reactive leadership approach and negative comparisons with a well-known MAT that deploys a very centralised approach over its academies.

We cannot assume, however, that such awareness of the risks reside in those who have previously been headteachers and who may now be system leaders within MATs. Cousin (2019, 170) notes that ‘the necessary skills, knowledge and competencies of system leaders are different from and additional to those of headship’ and that not all headteachers will make good system leaders, lacking the knowledge and skill to ‘to move from positional authority to political authority and the ability to engage with others’. Constantinides (2021b, 698) supports this view saying that leaders are ‘challenged by the need to utilise leadership skills that would enable them to work with and through others, most likely principals’, while a CEO in Cambridgeshire, in a national blog post, gives a valuable practitioner viewpoint when he states that being a head ‘you know the people in the school well, both staff and pupils ... You live and breathe what happens. As CEO, your work must be done through others, you become a leader of leaders’ (Munday 2016). Pain (2019) also cautions against the assumption that headteachers or even executive headteachers –

responsible for two or three schools and acting as ‘lead practitioner’ – have the right skill set and outlook to address the complexities of leading at scale. This is supported by Baxter and John (2021, 16) who noted, with the CEOs they studied, ‘a strong tendency to draw upon past schemas established in single school settings in order to make sense of the multi-level arrangement in which they now found themselves’ and which led, in some cases, to a lack of insight as these models of thinking did not suit their new environment. Such approaches may also lead to a return to now discredited styles of highly individualistic, toxic leadership (Craig 2022; Acuña and Male 2022) although scholars must also acknowledge that, in the absence of sufficient school capacity and a strong positive culture, a more direct, less distributed short-term approach may be needed from MAT leaders.

MAT leaders and political astuteness

Understanding ‘systemness’ of MATs is allied, however, with ‘political literacy, the understanding of political concepts and discourse and political astuteness and the ability to use political skills from this understanding for ethical ends’ (Close 2013, 178). Williams (2002, 118) notes the need to be skilled at navigating organisational boundaries and to be effective as a reticulist, influencer and broker, joining networks which ‘offer members the benefit of ‘being in the loop’ for information of all sorts, about emerging resource opportunities, changing government priorities, impending changes, potential scandals, new needs – the raw material for constructing a joined up agenda’. Other researchers see the role of the public manager as a neutral arbiter, balancing competing pressures, relying on persuasion and influence while recognising they are subject to the authority of government, requiring a political and not just a technical skill set (Yates and Hartley 2021).

Innes, citing the work of Bourdieu (2000), establishes a more negative view of a world in which micro-politics is the defining *modus operandi* of the MAT leader: where power, ideological disputes, political activity and struggle for control dominate. ‘Within organisations that contain multiple schools, potentially, across different socio-demographic and geographic contexts, it is reasonable to expect goal delivery and ideological disputes’; as a result, the system leader must manage conflict and ‘engage in politics in order to maintain the control necessary to satisfy both private and public partners’ (Innes 2021, 336). Given the lack of private sector sponsors in the MAT sector now it is unclear to whom Innes is referring to here. Furthermore, his evidence base is limited to one CEO and he portrays an unduly negative view of the leadership of that individual. When the CEO holds academy network meetings where ‘the heads question each other, while she gives feedback’, Innes prefers to see this ‘as the site of micro-political activity because the headteachers are purposefully put into direct competition under the gaze of the CEO’, whereas this could be

seen as powerful professional development towards system leadership (Innes 2021, 344). This tension at the heart of the MAT should not be ignored, however, and the author concludes that system leaders 'must monitor and use micro-politics carefully, as the challenges posed by expansion may run counter to the experiences and judgments of education professionals within their organisation' (Innes 2021, 346).

Hughes (2020) also stresses political literacy needs to be within the toolkit of the system leader. Conceptualising the system leader as working at various 'street' levels, she positions the role firmly within the neoliberal agenda, noting that although CEOs 'hold appropriate accreditation rendering him an expert, he nevertheless operates in other non-educational networks, that provide legitimacy and business opportunities' (481). Hughes, drawing on a narrow evidence base, notes that system leaders will act as street level professionals, eliciting the co-operation of colleagues through informal interactions in staffrooms and corridors, though it could be argued that in large MATs, this is unlikely to be the case on a regular basis. More pertinent is her description of the 'street level entrepreneur', more focused upon a range of local, regional and national networks, autonomous in decision making and then, finally, as policy networker and broker – a corporate agent, promoting the brand in public arenas with imprecise accountability, occupying 'a far more complex role as CEO of an extensive business empire' (Hughes 2020, 490). This focus upon an entrepreneurial disposition and single mindedness is supported by another contributor who also argues that the MAT structure 'encourages the establishment of authoritarian modes of management as network governance enables neoliberal rationalities to shape social relationships' (Kulz 2021, 67). Kulz draws upon a wide range of evidence to capture a '360' view of the MAT environment, although some of those interviewed – union organisers, LA officers – were seen to display an aversion to MATs as a concept. From this the author concludes that the MAT is part of a hostile political environment, where RSCs 'wield power by setting parameters that actively shape the capacity for agency' in preventing a school from receiving funding until it joined a MAT and where leaders are 'purging teachers who do not fit the agenda and invoking a vision narrative which makes the misinterpretation of totalitarian practices possible' (Kulz 2021, 69).

Wilkins (2017) also stresses the neoliberal context in which system leaders operate, that private sector participation in public education delivery is expected to improve outcomes on the basis that it 'purges public organisations of bureaucratic impediments and combative, political contexts that might otherwise obstruct the smooth, efficient running of a school as a business' (175). At the same time a new monopoly has emerged to replace LAs, 'helping to rescale the local so that the gaze of government comes to bear on the actions of others far more successfully than it would under local government management', the role of system leaders being 'to align micropolitics of

the schools with the political will and economic aspirations of the state' (Wilkins 2017, 181). At the micro or macro level, the system leader must thus acknowledge their potential influential role as political actor in the landscape.

Critique of professional learning for system leadership

Understanding loosely coupled and complex systems, and what may be termed political literacy, are fundamental vital components in the preparation and development of MAT leadership. Close, Kendrick, and Outhwaite (2018, 79) state, however, 'there has not been much systematic or long-term thinking about professional development to date' for system leaders. Many MAT leaders started as executive headteachers, combining their role in overseeing their 'home' school with another. Pain (2019) identified that the transition from executive headteacher to CEO (corporate leader) has been far more challenging and perilous than some anticipated. Greany and McGinity (2022, 199) point out that for headteachers becoming CEOs, it has 'required rapid learning and shifting identities for those former headteachers, as they move from a role of positional leadership with hands on responsibility for pupil learning in a single school to a strategic role developing a complex organization', while a former National Schools Commissioner agrees that this is something which may not come naturally to former headteachers (Carter 2020). Cousin (2019, 172) notes that poor training has the consequence of 'high levels of stress for both system leaders and headteachers which sometimes leads to a loss of committed professionals from the system', while also noting that in her study several respondents put their success down to luck, which is difficult to replicate.

One potential route to addressing these challenges is the nationally accredited NPQEL programme, established in 2017 to provide the professional development required to enable leadership transition (Cousin 2019). With a focus on assessment via school improvement activities we argue, however, that this showed a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and context of system leadership, in that this is not the sphere of influence in which such leaders responsible for multiple schools are working. Cousin (2019) observes that the NPQEL did include a mix of coaching, mentoring and peer coaching, but that 'behaviours which are not assessed included commitment, collaboration, personal drive, resilience, awareness, integrity and respect' (175), a number of which we have identified here as crucial to working in the 'messiness' of the MAT world. Whilst the NPQEL has now been re-designed (Department for Education 2022), and a study of its impact in the coming months would be helpful, a review of the evidence based cited in the re-design specification suggests that the programme still has a very narrow model of MAT leadership style in mind and with the goal of delivering the government's agenda. One consequence is that MATs dissatisfied with external leadership development programmes may seek to 'grow their own', but it has been noted such approaches could

be risky as they may lack criticality and alternative perspectives, with subsequent negative effects for the wider system (Gibson 2018).

Instead, we propose an alternative approach, based on the use of high quality action research projects which focus upon a collaborative approach to real world problems, a major distinguishing feature of leadership training in high performing systems where 'participants experience an influencing role, in an unfamiliar setting without formal authority, to deliver a real change, [providing] the opportunity to surface and explore one's own and others' theories of action' (Cousin 2019, 173–180). Furthermore, such professional learning should be combined with an explicit theory of change relevant to the context as suggested within the *Coherence Framework for Education* (Fullan 2020, 121). Based on the discussion above relating to MATs as loosely coupled systems, we also conclude programmes of leadership development for MAT leaders should draw upon a better understanding of the interrelationship between culture and change, considering the work of Schein (2004) and Fullan (2008). Burke (2014), using social network analysis, also establishes a useful approach to leading change in loosely coupled systems, emphasising the power of local networks and sub groups.

Case study: the development of emerging system leadership in the MAT anonymous

Having identified many key competencies required for effective leadership of MATs, and the implications for professional learning, we now consider how organisations may need to respond. The MAT anonymous was formed in 2016 from three existing Ofsted Good and Outstanding 'converter' academies, a starting point that has led to the development of the organisation as one based on high levels of local oversight and autonomy, functioning conceptually as a loosely coupled organisation. This has inevitably led to tensions as the trust tries to harness its potential and seek greater alignment for the purposes of school improvement and efficiency, while growing rapidly from seven schools to fifteen brings the risk of proving 'detrimental to both cohesion within the trust and a lack of cohesive governance structure' (Baxter and Floyd 2019, 1063). There is a limited pool of emerging system leaders able to navigate this context, however, with several of the trust's school leaders having been recently appointed and not deemed to have the necessary competencies and MAT-wide perspective to operate effectively as system leaders. It is of paramount importance, therefore, that the CEO and central team develop the next generation of leaders to enable the organisation to flourish and remain sustainable.

The following recommendations are made. Firstly, whilst the NPQEL remains an important component of the professional learning required for leadership in the trust, emerging system leaders need access to the other key competencies,

such as an understanding of the necessary regulatory framework, the financial, health and safety and human resources implications and the opportunities for enhancing the quality of education for pupils through curriculum innovation. Furthermore, it is considered the 'wicked' problems', previously noted by Williams (2002) can only be resolved with system cohesion beyond the trust. Peterson and Hannon (2021), for example, describe fundamental challenges facing society that suggest the combined power of MATs, working in partnership across the sector and with other organisations such as healthcare and the voluntary sector, are best placed to resolve.

Whilst the NPQEL could provide a framework for this thinking we suggest, however, without an underpinning awareness of system thinking and explicit understanding of the political dimension, and how to turn this theoretical learning into action, the qualification is likely to be limited in impact. It is the collective view of the Board and CEO that emerging system leaders in the trust need to be exposed to the complexity of the organisation in a systematic and planned manner. This will almost certainly mean secondment to the central leadership team to experience what Baxter and Floyd (2019) and Baxter and John (2021) describe as 'strategy as learning'. Drawing upon 30 interviews, from 6 MATs, Baxter and Floyd describe such learning as 'productive and tension filled, as individuals and groups work through the processes and power struggles to create strategic narratives that permeate organisational discourse' (1056). At the same time, emerging leaders need ownership of 'wicked' pan-Trust projects, working to build coalitions for change; engagement with local, regional and national changemakers to understand the political nuances of operating at scale and across boundaries, especially with headteachers who, having been promoted in an environment where the trust's central leadership team has assumed responsibility for such activity, do not see the 'whole' organisation. The trust must also provide opportunities for personal and group reflection to expose and challenge existing cognitive models of leadership which may not be fit for purpose in a MAT (Constantinides 2021a). A structure to develop this professional learning from outside the education sector identifies the following behavioural descriptors for system leadership development, with the associated behaviours to be demonstrated and a menu of interventions being used to develop them (NHS 2017):

- Individual Effectiveness;
- Relationships and Connectivity;
- Innovation and Improvement; and
- Learning and Capacity Building,

These behaviours offer a potential route to help guide the trust as it seeks to develop the system competencies alongside the more transactional and DfE-agenda specific learning via the NPQEL. Finally, the trust should strongly

consider the strengths of Masters' level accreditation where there is a focus on systems leadership, to ensure the theory and policy context in which MATs operate is exposed.

Conclusion

The MAT landscape is still emerging and evolving, more than 10 years after the Academies Act 2010 was implemented, an experiment in reform that shows no indication of slowing down. It is possible the extension of the academisation policy will act as a solution to intractable problems, with MATs offering huge opportunities to address the problems of underperforming schools, of aligning schools with a wider civic endeavour and building a climate for innovation to shape education for the challenges ahead for this century (Baukham and Cruddas 2021).

As this paper has shown, however, MAT leadership requires different ways of thinking and working than required for headship of individual schools, especially so in organisations which are loosely coupled in nature. In MATs where there is less likely to be an underlying rationale and imperative for repair and cultural reset, the environment in which leaders operate is more contested and more complex – where institutional culture, agency, history, geography and community potentially collide with the vision and ambitions of the MAT. The application of Schein's (2004) work on organisational culture and change to these types of MATs warrants further investigation, alongside more extensive research on the nature and extent of isomorphism, building on the structural integration work of Greany and McGinity (2021). Not all MATs operate in a hostile, market driven and highly centralised manner, eroding local democracy and 'enabling neoliberal rationalities to shape social relationships' (Kulz 2021, 67). Whilst the case study presented here does not allow us to assess how far that negative interpretation is reflective of the sector as a whole, it is clear that MAT leaders working across multiple sites must understand 'systemness' if they are to address and harness professional and social capital to achieve the goals of system leadership, the creation of learning organisations and to co-realise transforming action (Senge 2006).

Wilkins (2017, 181) warns us that 'it is misguided to think MATs are apolitical or anti-political', meaning leaders must navigate the internal tensions within the trust, influencing and negotiating at the micro street level. Additionally, leaders are required who are comfortable interacting and resolving the tensions between the needs and desires of larger society and those of the learners within the local community, demonstrating an ability to span the boundary between the two, 'negotiating a space between the state, market and community logics to resolve tensions between competing identities, structures and/or values' (Constantinides 2021a, 40).

Formal learning, such as that provided by NPQEL, does not necessarily address these critical competencies for systems thinking. For the case study trust explored here and other MATs it is easy to fall into the trap of reducing professional discussion, stakeholder conflict and cultural dissonance for political and operational expediency. Emerging system leaders need to develop their ability to conceptualise and act upon these tensions, internally and externally to the MAT, building new models of proactive, inclusive leadership. Not to do so risks the success of the MAT project as a driver for positive change and, arguably, the wider health of the English school system.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Jonathan Culpin is Chief Executive Officer of a multi-academy trust and a student on the MBA Educational Leadership (International), run by the UCL Centre for Educational Leadership.

Trevor Male is Associate Professor at the UCL Centre for Educational Leadership and Programme Leader for the MBA Educational Leadership (International).

ORCID

Trevor Male  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3703-3469>

References

- Acuña, Blanca, and Trevor Male. 2022. "Toxic Leadership and Academics' Work Engagement in Higher Education: A Cross-Sectional Study from Chile." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 30. doi:10.1177/17411432221084474.
- Baukham, I., and L. Cruddas. 2021. *Knowledge Building – School Improvement at Scale*. Nottingham: Confederation of School Trusts.
- Baxter, J., and A. Floyd. 2019. "Strategic Narrative in Multi-academy Trusts in England: Principal Drivers for Expansion." *British Educational Research Journal* 45 (5): 1050–1071.
- Baxter, J., and A. John. 2021. "Strategy as Learning in Multi-academy Trusts in England: Strategic Thinking in Action." *School Leadership & Management* 41 (4–5): 290–310.
- Bourdieu, P. 2000. *Pascalian Meditations*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Polity.
- Burke, W. 2014. "Changing Loosely Coupled Systems." *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 50 (4): 423–444.
- Carter, D. 2020. *Leading Academy Trusts: Why Some Fail, But Most Don't*. Sir David Carter with Laura McInerney. Melton, Woodbridge: John Catt Education Ltd.
- Close, P. 2013. "Developing Political Astuteness: A Leadership Coaching Journey." *School Leadership & Management* 33 (2): 178–196.
- Close, P., A. Kendrick, and D. Outhwaite. 2018. "Developing System Leaders: A Research Engagement Approach." *Management in Education* 32 (2): 79–84.

- Constantinides, M. 2021a. "Instructional Reform and Multiple Institutional Logics: Insights from Executive Leadership in English Multi-academy Trusts." *Educational Review* 0 (0): 1–18. doi:10.1080/00131911.2021.1916441.
- Constantinides, M. 2021b. "Understanding the Complexity of System-level Leadership in the English Schooling Landscape." *Journal of Educational Administration* 59 (6): 688–701.
- Cousin, S. 2019. *System Leadership: Policy and Practice in the English Schools System*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Cousin, S., and Q. Gu. 2022. "Collaboration, Partnerships and System Leadership Across Schools." In *School Leadership and Education System Reform*. 2nd ed., edited by T. Greany, and P. Earley, 185–196. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Craig, I. 2022. "Toxic Leadership." In *School Leadership and Education System Reform 2/e*, edited by T. Greany, and P. Earley, 243–252. London: Bloomsbury.
- Department for Education. 2016. *Educational Excellence Everywhere*. London: Department for Education.
- Department for Education. 2017. *National Professional Qualification for Executive Leadership (NPQEL)*. London: Department for Education.
- Department for Education. 2020. *Teaching School Hubs*. London: Department for Education.
- Department for Education. 2021. *Building Strong Academy Trusts: Guidance for Academy Trusts and Prospective Converters*. London: Department for Education.
- Department for Education. 2022. *National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) Reforms*. London: Department for Education.
- Fullan, M. 2004. *Leadership & Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action*. London: Sage.
- Fullan, M. 2008. *The Six Secrets of Change: What the Best Leaders Do to Help their Organizations Survive and Thrive*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fullan, M. 2020. *Leading in a Culture of Change (2/e)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gibson, M. T. 2018. "Leadership Preparation and Development Within a Multi-academy Trust: Self-Improving or Self-serving?" *Management in Education* 32 (2): 92–97.
- Glatter, R. 2022. "Defining Core Purposes for Schools." In *School Leadership and Education System Reform 2/e*, edited by T. Greany, and P. Earley, 29–36. London: Bloomsbury.
- Greany, T., and R. Higham. 2022. "School System Governance and the Implications for Schools." In *School Leadership and Education System Reform 2/e*, edited by T. Greany, and P. Earley, 37–46. London: Bloomsbury. Available at.
- Greany, T., and R. McGinity. 2021. "Structural Integration and Knowledge Exchange in Multi-academy Trusts: Comparing Approaches with Evidence and Theory from non-Educational Sectors." *School Leadership & Management* 41 (4–5): 311–333.
- Greany, T., and R. McGinity. 2022. "Leadership and School Improvement in Multi Academy Trusts." In *School Leadership and Education System Reform 2/e*, edited by T. Greany, and P. Earley, 197–206. London: Bloomsbury.
- Hargreaves, D. H. 2010. *Creating a Self-improving School System*. Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services.
- Hughes, B. 2020. "Investigating the CEO of a MAT: Examining Practices and Positions on 'the Street'." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 48 (3): 478–495.
- Innes, M. 2021. "The Micro-politics of Policy Enactment in a Multi-academy Trust." *School Leadership & Management* 41 (4–5): 334–351.
- Kools, M., and L. Stoll. 2016. *What Makes a School a Learning Organisation?* Paris: OECD.
- Kulz, C. 2021. "Everyday Erosions: Neoliberal Political Rationality, Democratic Decline and the Multi-Academy Trust." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 42 (1): 66–81.
- Male, T. 2018. "School Governance and Academisation in England." Paper presented to Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (CCEAM) Conference, Malta, November.

- Male, T. 2019. "Governance in Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs): Evidence from the Field." Paper presented to ECER 2019 Conference, Hamburg, September.
- Munby, S. 2022. "Imperfect Leadership." In *School Leadership and Education System Reform 2/e*, edited by T. Greany, and P. Earley, 263–272. London: Bloomsbury.
- Munday, S. 2016. "How to Move from Headship to Being a MAT CEO." *The Times Educational Supplement* [Preprint], (5199).
- National Audit Office. 2018. *Converting Schools to Academies*. London: National Audit Office.
- NHS. 2017. *Supporting Systems Leadership Development Across England: Interventions, Options and Opportunities*. Leeds, UK: Local Leadership Academies of the NHS Leadership Academy.
- Orton, J. D., and K. E. Weick. 1990. "Loosely Coupled Systems: A Reconceptualization." *The Academy of Management Review* 15 (2): 203–223.
- Pain, M. 2019. *Being the CEO: The Six Dimensions of Organisational Leadership*. Woodbridge: John Catt Education.
- Peterson, A., and V. Hannon, eds. 2021. *Thrive: The Purpose of Schools in a Changing World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Roundtable, A. 2021. *Not a Race' for All Schools to Join MATs, Says Herrington*. Accessed December 29, 2021. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/no-deadline-all-schools-convert-multi-academy-trusts/>.
- Schein, E. 2004. *Organisational Culture and Leadership* (3/e). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Senge, P. 2006. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. London: Random House Business.
- Senge, P., H. Hamilton, and J. Kania. 2015. "The Dawn of System Leadership." *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 13: 27–33.
- Spender, J., and P. H. Grinyer. 1995. "Organizational Renewal: Top Management's Role in a Loosely Coupled System." *Human Relations* 48 (8): 909–926.
- Timmins, N. 2015. *The Practice of System Leadership, The King's Fund*. Accessed December 2, 2021. <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/practice-system-leadership>.
- Weick, K. 1976. "Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 21 (1): 1–19.
- Wilkins, A. 2017. "Rescaling the Local: Multi-academy Trusts, Private Monopoly and Statecraft in England." *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 49 (2): 171–185.
- Williams, P. 2002. "The Competent Boundary Spanner." *Public Administration* 80 (1): 103–124.
- Yates, S., and J. Hartley. 2021. "Learning to Lead with Political Astuteness." *International Public Management Journal* 24 (4): 562–583.