

Making Sense of Complexity:  
Executive Leaders and Executive  
Leadership in an English Multi-  
Academy Trust.

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I, Michael Collins, confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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## Abstract

The emergence of new, multi-school organisational forms in England has been accompanied by distinctive new roles for school leaders, extending beyond individual schools. In multi-school organisations with formalised relationships, the new roles are commonly characterised as executive leadership and an increasingly common organisational form is a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). The new executive roles represent a significant professional challenge for individuals.

This study sought to understand and explain the response of individual leaders in new executive roles to the complexity they experience. A single embedded case study design explored how executive leadership was enacted in a MAT in relation to a domain of leadership practice, educational improvement. Executive leadership was considered to extend beyond an individual school and embrace both the principal executive leader (EL) and others involved in leadership in a MAT.

The conceptual framework underpinning the study draws on insights from complexity theories, seeing everyone as embedded in ongoing networks of interaction and communication. Leadership is conceptualised as plural and relational, arising from multiple loci, with contextually specific configurations of leadership relationships emerging from peoples' enactment of leadership practices, through processes of organisational sensemaking.

The analysis combined qualitative data with analysis of socially constructed instrumental and expressive social networks. Findings show how the actions of the EL cannot be understood in isolation from the networks of relationships and flow of interaction and relating that constitute the organisation, and that leaders draw on familiar practices to bring about educational improvement in novel contexts which nevertheless challenge identities, roles and boundaries. Some distinctive practices associated with executive leadership are identified. The study contributes by proposing the idea of flows of enactment to describe the complexity experienced by leaders, unfolding shifting configurations of relations, emergent figurations of power, and plural sensemaking. Implications for MATs as organisations are also explored.

## Impact Statement

The research, accompanying analysis and discussion presented in this thesis have an impact in multiple domains. The study explores the practice of leadership empirically, in the specific context of a Multi Academy Trust (MAT) and the conclusions set out conceptual and methodological contributions in the academic field of educational leadership. There is also relevance for leaders in the context of MATs, for those like myself working with them, and more generally for those in analogous contexts.

A significant conceptual contribution the study makes is developing a characterisation of executive leadership in a MAT that more fully captures the complex, dynamic nature of enacting leadership. The notion of flows of enactment starts with the experience of individuals relating in organisations, recognising different types of interaction, shifting configurations of leadership relations, emergent figurations of power, variation between leadership practices, and influences beyond the organisation that shape taken-for-granted ways of thinking. Developing the concept of flows of enactment empirically in the specific context of a MAT illustrates distinctive features of executive leadership and offers the potential for others to develop the thinking further.

The study also makes a methodological contribution with the specific approach taken to combining qualitative data and Social Network Analysis. Socially constructed networks of leadership relationships are mapped, and when combined with qualitative analysis, give a distinctive insight into emergent patterns of influencing relationships. The findings also offer an empirically grounded account of the experience of complexity showing how an important conceptual perspective can be applied to specific contexts.

The dissemination of the contributions in academic networks will be through presentations at conferences and the publication of papers.

The study has an impact for leaders in the context of a MAT, offering a way of understanding the processes taking place in such organisations and highlighting features of executive leadership in the case presented, illuminated by the theoretically informed analysis outlined above. Salient aspects include how influence emerges through processes of sensemaking and sensegiving and distinctive practices, such as reconstituting organisations and redefining boundaries. Importantly the study shows in a specific context how the actions of executive leaders cannot be understood in isolation from the complex networks of relationships and flow of interaction and relating that constitute the organisation.

The insights into executive leadership in a MAT are also valuable to those working with leaders in MATs or in analogous contexts. Additionally, the study offers findings about a MAT as an organisation, in particular the challenges to identities and boundaries presented by the integration of new organisations post-merger and the extended and multi-stage character of the development.

There is scope for dissemination directly in my work context with peers and influencers, directly with leaders in the sector through their networks and through writing in sector publications.

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## Reflective Statement

The Education Doctorate (EdD) regulations require a reflective statement to be included with the thesis. The structure of the doctorate is that a portfolio is submitted after the first year of the programme consisting of the work from three modules and a reflective statement. There then follows an extended research project, the Institution Focused Study (IFS) and finally, the research study leading to this thesis. The statement to be included here is thus the second reflective statement.

In the first reflective statement I wrote about my interest in complexity theories and their scope for offering insights into my own professional experience and also of others in leadership positions in education, and in schools especially. The perspective of Ralph Stacey (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000; Stacey, 2007) and others on complexity emphasises the idea that everyone, researchers included, is part of a continuing flow of communication and relating and, they suggest, that idea has implications for how to conduct research. In the first reflective statement for the portfolio, I took up the idea of a reflexive narrative, proposed by Stacey, to explore what had led me to begin doctoral studies and my experience of beginning to apply ideas and develop research proposals.

Talking about reflexivity, Griffin and Stacey say:

the appropriate research method is reflexive in two senses. First, the individual researcher is required to reflect upon his or her own life history and how this has shaped the manner in which he or she reflects upon experience. Second, there is a social form of reflexivity requiring the researcher to locate his or her ways of making sense of experience in the wider traditions of thought that have evolved in the history of human interaction (Griffin & Stacey 2006, pg. 10)

My first statement leaned more towards the first of Griffin and Stacey's senses, reflecting on my professional life history, interactions with leaders and leadership, and engagement with ideas about complexity. In this statement, I will pursue the second sense more, taking a narrative approach to describing the development of

the research and locating myself and the research in 'wider traditions of thought' (ibid).

### **Reflexive Narrative: development of ideas**

I undertook the EdD to research educational leaders' leadership in groups of schools, a context in which there was rapid change and a manifestly complex and unpredictable environment. The process of clarifying concepts, designing a research study, analysing and arriving at conclusions has, I can see, followed a twisting path. The process has been a non-linear, emergent one and the notions of social, making sense and evolving thinking, referred to by Griffin and Stacey, have become important to me.

The portfolio stage, of the doctorate, consisted of three modules, the first focusing on professionalism, and then two on research methods that involved developing a research proposal and then testing some of the methods in the proposal. Thinking about professionalism was an opportunity to write about ideas that remained consistent throughout the later development of the doctorate like complexity, leadership, and networks. I also began to think about identity and the experience of individuals who were potentially meeting conflicting or paradoxical demands and narratives.

Thinking about people's experience of complexity and relating that to the networks of relationships of which they were a part, led me to use the opportunity of the research methods modules to test a design using Social Network Analysis (SNA) to map the network of relationships around two executive headteachers. I also collected qualitative data from focused conversations. The pilot began to illuminate how those individual leaders were perceiving their roles and highlighted how contextually specific their experiences were. More fundamentally, the activity began to challenge my clarity of focus and how I was applying and understanding key concepts such as complexity and leadership. It prompted me to reflect on the use

of SNA, how I was interpreting the networks, and how differently individuals perceived their own networks.

For the IFS stage, a full research study was undertaken and I conceived of this as an exploratory study into how executive leaders were understanding and carrying out their roles. I constructed the complexity perspective as informing and shaping the way I used other concepts and to some extent the design of methods. My appreciation of the complex responsive processes perspective developed by Stacey and others (op cit) was deepened, whilst becoming clearer about how it was distinguished from other approaches to complexity. I also began to develop more clearly the idea of leadership as emerging in relationships and arising from multiple loci through a variety of mechanisms.

The methods adopted for the study were extended from the pilot and involved comparing two executive headteachers, again in different MATs, not the same ones as for the pilot, but this time in each of the executive headteachers' networks, also interviewing and mapping the networks of two other people. Collecting and analysing both qualitative and network data again led to some valuable findings as well as stimulating further reflections on conceptual and methodological issues.

Analysing networks required me to develop some technical knowledge and capabilities with SNA. Applying them to the data collected alongside qualitative analysis presented new challenges to my thinking. The study produced valuable findings about the way the executive leaders had conceived of their role and the nature of their organisations which subsequently contributed to narrowing the focus of the thesis research study. The challenge with the network data was to be clear about how it contributed to the study's aims. Whilst extensive analysis of networks was possible and a range of interesting characteristics of the networks was derived, having presented these in the IFS report, it was evident I needed to be clearer about what insights they were giving to the nature of leadership, and what meaning was attributed to networks and connections between people.

As I considered the question of the nature and significance of interactions in networks during work on the IFS, and also reflected more on a complexity perspective that started with people's experiences and emphasised social processes, the relevance of the work of Karl Weick and the idea of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) became increasingly evident. While developing the conceptual framework for the thesis, sensemaking as a social process and its relationship to the complexity perspective then became more important and central.

My personal reflection now is that in designing and carrying out a pilot and then the IFS, my understanding and thinking in relation to the assumptions and concepts underpinning the design were changing, and being refined. This had a parallel with the way the concept of sensemaking is formulated by Weick (*ibid*). It was by actually carrying out research, or acting into an environment, that I received information or had experiences that needed to be made sense of. As my thinking evolved and concepts clarified, the way I framed questions and what I noticed about practices in MATs also evolved.

Core ideas in the conceptual framework informing the thesis study remained, as I have already indicated, similar to those with which I began working in the first module of the EdD programme, those of complexity, leadership, and networks. The twisting path my thinking followed involved re-visiting the concepts iteratively. I was immersed in the broader context I was researching professionally, and challenged more directly by the research itself, and by considering different ways of thinking through reading the wider literature.

Introducing sensemaking as another core idea in the conceptual framework was an important step that, I can see, emerged from the combination of researching, reading, reflecting on own experience, testing ideas with others and reapplying them to research.

## **Reflections on the EdD programme**

Undertaking a doctoral programme alongside continuing in a job has proved rewarding and challenging in equal measure. The relevance of the research focus to my professional life is one source of satisfaction and enrichment. There is too a personal, developmental dimension. My original motivations for pursuing the doctorate, considered more fully in my reflective statement at the portfolio stage, related to the desire to consider some more general themes about complexity and social organising, with the professional context being an arena in which to explore those themes. The twisting, experiential and intellectual journey I have described has been another source of reward and satisfaction.

I have described some of the intellectual challenges in the reflexive narrative above. The practical challenges involved in creating the space and time to pursue studies alongside employment and other demands required discipline and much forbearance and support of others. The structuring of the EdD programme made its own contribution to meeting some of these challenges. Conducting and writing in effect two pilot studies which, by my choice, were addressing the same themes as the final thesis, meant they not only contributed to the development of the study itself but also contributed to the development and refinement of practical skills required.

One of the most important sources of support and discovery has been the temporary communities that have sprung along the course of the journey. Some have been groups of peers offering mutual support and encouragement. The willingness of experts in various fields to respond directly to approaches and enquiries and engage in dialogue has been inspiring and important and in the same way, one or two groups have welcomed me into a regular and thoughtful exploration of some of the conceptual areas like complexity. The openness I describe is well characterised by the phrase professional generosity and is a trait I aspire to emulate in my continuing journey.

# Chapter 1: Introducing the Study, Context, Aims and Questions

This chapter introduces the study that is the subject of this thesis. I explain the professional challenge I perceived for leaders in English schools and my positionality in relation to that challenge. I explore the current context of schools in England before outlining the relevance of the research and introducing the broad questions I propose to investigate.

## 1.1 George

The story of George, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Neighbourhood Multi-Academy Trust, gives a helpful context to the questions and reflections that stimulated the research in this study<sup>1</sup>. Neighbourhood Multi-Academy Trust (NMAT) was the site of my research and Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) are a relatively new type of organisation in the English educational context. George joined NMAT as the CEO with considerable experience in education. He was previously CEO of another MAT, and before that he had worked for government agencies established to directly implement education policies in England. He had moved to roles in government agencies having previously been a headteacher for several years.

When George was starting his career as a teacher in the 1980s, senior roles he was to go on to do did not exist. Only the role of headteacher would have been familiar to him at the time. The intervening period has been one of continuous, wide-ranging policy initiatives and multiple structural reforms to the organisation and governance of schools in England (Glatter, 2014), with far-reaching consequences.

Those consequences include: the emergence of new organisational forms (Earley & Greany, 2017); the nature of leadership roles in schools, which has evolved and changed continuously (Earley et al., 2012); and new roles emerging for school

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been pseudonymised and some details changed to preserve anonymity and confidentiality.

leaders, variously described and theorised, for example, headteachers acting beyond their schools as System Leaders (Fullan, 2006; Higham et al., 2009), or being responsible for more than one school as Executive Leaders (Lord et al., 2016). Understanding the experience of George and others like him, the nature and significance of the leadership roles they carry out and how they enact them, became the focus of this research.

## 1.2 My Positionality

My teaching career began in the 1980s and I subsequently moved from senior leadership in a school into work in government agencies and departments. The agencies for which I worked had a variety of direct and indirect relationships with schools and other organisations like Local Authorities (LAs). The network of connections between my organisation, schools, LAs and other agencies, led to me think about the various influences on schools and their leaders and how those influences related to what people did. I perceived the responses of individuals to any initiative depended on their understanding of the initiative and the particular context of their school or locality.

Writings drawing on complexity theories (J. Chapman, 2004; Stacey, 2007) provided a helpful framework to begin to think about the connection between the intentions and plans of those who formulated policies and the responses of individuals and groups in the schools and LAs themselves. Complexity theories offered a way of relating many separate, local actions and experiences in individual schools to emerging patterns across many contexts.

Conceptual insights from complexity theories included conceiving of schools and the connections amongst them as a system, with individual organisations acting independently but remaining interrelated. The idea of unexpected or unintended consequences emerging from actions of separate but interdependent elements was

a helpful insight. I subsequently applied complexity concepts in an exploration of local actions and solutions in the context of a national headteacher succession planning initiative, for instance (M. Collins, 2013).

I was keenly aware of the professional challenge for individuals like George, of working in an environment where much was familiar but much was changing. Individual schools and expectations of them remained recognisably similar, but the way schools related to each other, and the formal organisations connecting and governing schools, changed quite rapidly. I recognised that individuals frequently stepped into new types of roles, as a consequence of change, with no blueprints for these new roles, either in terms of policy or how to enact them. Recognition of the professional challenge for individuals like George, and conceiving of individuals, organisations and their context as a complex environment, was the stimulus for this study.

The response of schools to policy has been the focus of much research and critical theorising (Ball, Maguire & A. Braun, 2012). A promising aspect of drawing on complexity ideas was that it offered a way of understanding not just the influence of the external environment on the local responses of people in organisations, but also how their responses contribute to changing and creating their local context and, by extension, the wider environment in which they act.

My attention was focused on how both formal leaders and others in organisations respond to the complexity they are in the midst of, and how their response relates to their organisation's development. Complexity thinking highlighted both the many influences on schools and the responses of everyone in the organisation. I was thinking of leadership as not simply the actions of one individual, significant as they may be, but something involving many people throughout organisations.

The specific instance of an individual leader having direct responsibility for two or

more schools was an example of a particular situation in which the professional challenge of new roles and novel situations was manifested, and an increasingly common one as I developed the research. The formal roles associated with direct responsibility for more than one school have generally been designated by the term executive, albeit without any great consistency or definition (Lord et al., 2016). For this initial discussion, I will follow Lord (ibid.) in using executive to refer to roles with responsibility for, and acting beyond and between, two or more schools. Such roles are increasingly, although not exclusively, found in the context of a MAT.

The focus of the research is thus executive leadership within a MAT, both the professional challenge for the designated executive leader and the emergence of leadership in the MAT beyond individual schools. A brief outline of the changing environment is relevant at this point.

### **1.3 Context**

Courtney (2015), taking a broad view of type, mapped between 70 and 90 types of schools in England. The types identified were not mutually exclusive. Some schools are differentiated by their legal status and by institutions that have a direct role in their governance, such as LAs, Churches, and the Department for Education (DfE). Other types are differentiated by specialisms, for example, the specific groups of students for which they cater, or the curriculum they offer. Courtney (ibid.) identified groups of schools, or 'multi-schools' as a distinct type, varying in nature and legal status.

Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) are an example of multi-school groups that have emerged in England, especially in the decade since 2010, from the interaction of successive initiatives and reforms (Greany, 2014). A MAT is a charitable company with a board of trustees and a single accountable officer usually referred to as the CEO. The trust is ultimately responsible for the education of the children in the schools that are part of the trust and is funded through a Funding Agreement, a formal

contract (Wolfe, 2013), with the Department for Education (DfE). The academy schools within the trust are outside the control of LAs in terms of governance. Over a thousand MATs have now been established in England (DfE, 2015). West and Wolfe (2019) found, however, great variety in the particular legal arrangements and funding agreements even within this quite well-defined type of multi-school group.

A number of studies have explored the changing relationships between schools and the development of multi-school groups including MATs. Simkins et al. (2018) characterised groups based on variations in four domains: the history of group formation, group organisation, group structure and intergroup relations. The domains capture the variety in the geographical spread of groups; variety in the size and similarity of schools in a group; and similarities and differences in the way activity was coordinated between schools in a group. Greany and Higham (2018) also researched the changing nature of school groups and the relationships between them, Local Authorities (LAs) and central government. They analysed changes from the perspective of hierarchies, markets and networks, concluding that the increased importance of networks and groupings represented 'complex local responses to hierarchical and market governance' (ibid. pg. 17). Extending Simkins et al.'s analysis, they suggested the way groups emerged depended on the history of local relationships between schools and the LA, the context of a school, and the agency of local actors. They reported that many leaders in schools saw as incoherent the emerging wider organisation of schools, and relationships between them and other organisations.

The work of Courtney, West and Wolfe, Simkins et al., and Greany and Higham, give insights into how varied and changing the local contexts of multi-school groups are, how broad the range of influences, and how varied local responses may be. Even with a narrower focus on MATs, differences were observed. A general understanding and acceptance of what a MAT was may have emerged – subsequently clarified, articulated and presented as guidance by central government (DfE, 2017) – but there was not, however, a closely defined set of arrangements defining what this meant in practice. There was no ready blueprint to guide individual leaders taking on roles in

new contexts.

Investigations of MATs more specifically, highlight differences and commonalities in their development. Cirin (2017) found common perceptions and trends in terms of intention. Most leaders saw more effective collaboration between schools as a key benefit of forming a MAT and said that having a vision and clear ethos for the MAT was important. Cirin reported that MATs most commonly sought to introduce common administrative arrangements between schools, alongside changing governance arrangements for individual schools. Menzies et al. (2018), however, found great diversity in how introducing common arrangements was approached. They found a

multitude of ways of being devolved or centralised ... leaders were constantly adapting and adjusting their strategies (ibid. pg. 6).

Salokangas and Chapman (2014), in a comparative study of two larger MATs of 15 to 20 schools, found considerable variation between and within the MATs. They concluded that relationships within MATs were diverse and explained by a multiplicity of factors (ibid. pg. 383) including the specific characteristics of an individual school as well as the governance arrangements of the trust. Greany (2018) investigated how multi-school groups sought to bring about sustainable improvement in students' learning and school performance. They found common themes in the educational practices of leaders but found significant variation in how practices were approached. They suggested differences arose in how purpose was articulated, in who participated in decision-making within groups, and in processes coordinating activity within groups.

The context outlined is one in which much was familiar to individuals who were taking on formal roles in new organisations, particularly at the level of individual schools. Many, like George with whose story I began, had a number of years of experience in education, including leading individual schools as headteachers. There was much that was changing and uncertain, however. Studies showed great sensitivity to

context and history (Greany and Higham, 2018; Simkins et al., 2018), and variation between MATs (Menzies et al., 2018; Salokangas & C. Chapman, 2014).

## 1.4 Focus, Aims and Questions

I was seeking to understand and explain both what people do, and how leadership is enacted in the changing, uncertain, complex context outlined. Focusing on executive leadership within a MAT provided the opportunity to address the professional challenge for a designated executive leader, and to explore the emergence of leadership in the MAT beyond individual schools.

As I was developing this study, there was relatively little empirical research into how leadership is enacted in the newly emergent roles and contexts discussed. Studies cited in the review detail the broader context, influences on the way MATs are developing, and plans reported by mainly formally designated leaders. There was little research embracing both the experience of designated executive leaders, as well as others without formal executive positions in the context of a MAT.

There were empirical studies of academies and MATs. Rayner (2018), for example, investigated the responses of multiple leaders, but of one school as it became an academy. Hughes (2019) investigated the context of a MAT, but focused on the CEO and the exercise of his agency. The proposed perspective for my research, extending beyond an individual school and embracing more than an individual leader, in the specific context of a MAT, had the potential, therefore, to make an important empirical contribution, and also a conceptual one in terms of the enactment of executive leadership in a group of schools.

Complexity thinking and the implications for the conceptualisation of leadership will be developed more fully in Chapter 2. The argument is developed there, however, that an implication of a complexity perspective means the thinking, actions and

behaviours of anyone who played a role beyond individual schools were of interest. Crucially, the conceptualisation makes the relationships between people of particular interest.

Pilot research explored quite broadly how the executive leadership role was enacted in MATs. I decided in light of the piloting, to further focus the exploration of leadership, because researching a particular area of practice in greater depth, rather than seeking to investigate all areas of a MAT's activity as an organisation, would allow for a more detailed, richer analysis of how leadership was enacted. Practices relating to educational activity were discussed by all leaders during piloting. As a result, the broad domain of educational practices was chosen as a focus. Discussions of such practices usually carried with them the idea of improvement, either explicitly or implicitly and the focus of the research was therefore further narrowed and described as educational improvement. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2, I chose a broad framing of the term educational improvement to allow leaders themselves to interpret and give meaning to the concepts, recognising the novel context in which they were acting and the potential for a range of interpretations of the idea of improvement.

The main aim of the research was therefore to understand and explain the response of individual leaders to the complexity they experience in the current context in England, particularly those in new executive roles. I planned to do this by focusing on the organisational context of a MAT, executive leadership and a specific domain of practice, educational improvement. More specifically, the aim was to understand and explain how executive leadership for educational improvement is enacted in a MAT.

The research was guided by two broad questions. The first was related to the individual Executive Leader.

Research Question 1: How does an Executive Leader seek to bring about educational improvement in a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT)?

The second question related to the recognition that the relationships between all people who play a role in leadership in the MAT beyond individual schools were of particular interest.

Research Question 2: What patterns of leadership relations emerge beyond individual schools in a MAT?

## 1.5 Organisation of Chapters

In Chapter 2 the conceptual framework that guides the research is developed. The specific perspective on complexity, focusing on the people's experience, and the consequent conceptualisation of leadership as relational, are discussed, leading to a focus on practices and interaction, and the insights provided by sensemaking and social network analysis. Chapter 3 makes the case for a Complex Realist perspective and implications for a methodology that takes a case-based approach to investigate executive leadership in a MAT, and uses mixed methods to gather and analyse qualitative and network data. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the analysis of qualitative data structured around the Frames, Narratives and Practices in participants' accounts. Chapter 5 presents the findings of a network analysis focused primarily on the interactions of those involved in leadership practices beyond the boundaries of individual schools in a MAT. The overall findings, drawing on qualitative and network analysis are also presented. Chapter 6 discusses the findings and their implications, considering first the sensemaking processes in the MAT, and then the nature of leadership for educational improvement and executive leadership. Chapter 7 sets out the conclusions in relation to the Research Questions, and the contributions the study makes to understanding and conceptualising leadership in this complex context.

The study shows how the actions of a principal executive leader cannot be understood in isolation from the complex networks of relationships and flow of

interaction and relating that constitute the organisation. The analysis makes a contribution by drawing on qualitative and network data, and showing how unique enactments of leadership in particular contexts can be characterised. The findings also show how, in seeking to bring about educational improvement, leaders in a MAT draw on familiar practices. Enacting those practices in a new context challenges identities, roles and boundaries, a process that extends over time and continues even when there are no significant changes to the organisation.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review & Conceptual Framing

This chapter begins by developing the complexity perspective that underpins this research before considering its implications for the conceptualisation of leadership. I suggest a complexity perspective highlights the significance of the relationships and interactions between all the people who play a role in leadership in a MAT beyond individual schools. The perspective also indicates sensemaking and social network analysis as theoretical frameworks with which relationships and interactions can be considered.

I review key literatures and highlight insights from complexity, sensemaking, social network analysis, leadership and educational leadership, in order to propose a conceptual framework to guide the empirical work. I approached the review of the disparate literature by initially identifying significant and seminal texts through following frequent citations, taking note of references and recommendations from overviews, and following advice from experts in the field. To consider applications of the key concepts to education, in particular, educational leadership, I conducted searches of databases. The British Education Index, ERIC, EThOS and Google Scholar were searched using key phrases including 'school leadership', 'complexity theories', and 'education reform'. The searches were extended with the terms 'sensemaking', 'networks', 'social network analysis', 'executive leadership', 'academies', and 'Multi-Academy Trust' to include the specific focus of this research.

## **2.1 Complexity**

Complexity theories offer important insights and ways of thinking about the experience of people in organisations. There is not, however, a single, overarching complexity theory (Mitleton-Kelly, 2003; Alhadeff-Jones, 2008). Rather, there are a number of interrelated sets of concepts and approaches. Byrne (2013), citing Merton, argues that in bringing together varied observations and analyses, the idea of complexity is functioning as a mid-range theory. Rather than complexity theory as a single, narrowly defined explanatory and predictive set of propositions, I refer to a complexity perspective. The perspective is a broad framework within which to consider a range of empirical observations and theoretical analyses and their inter-

relationship.

Important complexity concepts, which largely originated in physical, biological and mathematical sciences, are elaborated below. The translation and application of complexity theories to social contexts are then discussed, with a particular focus on the use of complexity ideas in education.

## **Overview and Key Concepts**

Complexity theories largely developed from situations in which scientists in the physical, biological and mathematical sciences, working with very large numbers of entities, were

dealing simultaneously with a sizeable number of factors which are interrelated into an organic whole. ((Alhadeff-Jones, 2008 pg. 69) citing (Weaver, 1948))

Systems thinking and mathematical modelling of whole systems were thus central to developing complexity thinking in the sciences (Alhadeff-Jones, 2008; Weaver, 1948; Stacey, 2007). This review focuses on complexity concepts that have been most widely taken up in social sciences. Boulton, Allen & Bowman (2015) summarise the main complexity-related concepts as: the world is complex in that it is systemic; path dependent; sensitive to context; emergent; and episodic (meaning order and relative stability emerge from complex systems). In the sciences, complexity ideas have been applied in fields as diverse as evolutionary biology, molecular chemistry, cybernetics, and the physics of weather systems (Alhadeff-Jones, 2008). The themes and concepts implied by Boulton's summary are expanded on, relating them first to their genesis in the physical and biological sciences.

Modelling changing systems with large numbers of interconnected elements that function independently, but follow well-defined rules, led to descriptions of chaotic systems (Gleick, 1987). Small differences in initial conditions, leading to indirect but disproportionately large effects on emergent patterns, illustrated non-linear behaviour

and acute sensitivity to local contexts.

Such modelling is a deterministic account of systems because emergent patterns follow from the definition of the system and the rules followed by separate elements. Systems' behaviours are nevertheless uncertain and not readily predictable because the initial states are the consequence of the previous emergence of patterns. The relationship between what has gone before and future development is referred to as path dependence.

Emergence describes patterns that become evident that are characteristic of whole systems, not of individual elements. Individual elements function separately but interdependently (Kaufmann, 1995), and the elements are described as self-organising. An example of a biological system that can be thought of as a complex system is the human brain, with neurons the separate elements (Morowitz, 1995). Emergence understood as global patterns arising from the interaction of separate, self-organising, interdependent elements, describes patterns developing with no controlling plan or blueprint.

Prigogine (1984) showed that order and structure may emerge and increase in chemical and physical systems that are open to the environment outside their boundaries. Emergent structures dissipate energy as disorder in the wider systems increases. Prigogine's seminal contribution was to reconcile emergent order with the co-evolution of increasing disorder in open systems. A corollary is that the future behaviour of such open systems is inherently unknowable and unpredictable. Future states are contingent on what happened previously and interactions with changing environments to which the system is open. It is not simply that prediction is difficult, the nature of the system is that its evolution is both undetermined and irreversible (ibid.), a sharp distinction from deterministic mathematical models.

A phenomenon much used to illustrate complex systems is the flocking behaviour of

birds (Stacey, 2007). When flocking, each bird follows simple rules in order to maintain a particular distance and relative movement in respect of neighbours. Flocking is not the aim of any individual bird. The dramatic nature of the group, moving as if one entity, is an emergent effect.

Murmurations of starlings show changing patterns as they move, as individual birds adjust to features in their immediate context, affecting other birds. There is no control of the behaviour of the flock as a whole, the patterns arise from the interaction of the individual birds' behaviours, and the individual behaviours are subsequently influenced in part by the emergent global patterns, a recursive effect.

Flocking highlights the self-organising behaviour of the birds; their local interaction and sensitivity to immediate context; the emergence of patterns stable long enough to be observed whilst changing; and the interaction of the flock with its environment. The patterns may be stable but are sustained by the continually moving and adjusting flight of individual birds. The system is dynamic and birds may change their behaviour as they respond and adapt.

The concept of complex adaptive systems (CAS) (Gell-Mann, 1994) was developed to describe systems in which elements change as they interact locally. Adaptation of separate elements means there is scope for novelty and variety to emerge. A further implication is that the emergent characteristics of the 'system as a whole' depend as much on the interactions and behaviour of the constituents of a system, as the characteristics of the individual constituents themselves.

If interactions between elements of a system determine its nature, global characteristics cannot be inferred from the perspective of individual elements (Cilliers, 1998 pg. 8). Further, emergent, global patterns may influence subsequent interactions. To put it another way, cause and effect are entangled. Boulton et al.

describe this as 'a dance between patterns and events' (Boulton, Allen & Bowman, 2015 pg. 28).

The idea of boundaries is always implicit in references to systems (Eddy-Spicer & James, 2019; Cilliers, 2001). References to the 'system as a whole' assume that systems can be recognised and delimited. Considering a flock of birds, it is arguably clear what is included and what is not. Defining other systems may be more subjective or contingent. As Cilliers puts it:

We frame the system by describing it in a certain way (for a certain reason), but we are constrained in where the frame can be drawn. (Cilliers, 2001 pg. 140)

He goes on to say that boundaries should thus be seen as 'constituting that which is bounded' (ibid. pg. 140), rather than simply separating one thing from another.

The outline of key concepts has elaborated Boulton, Allen & Bowman's (2015) characterisation. Systemic behaviour is described in terms of open, complex adaptive systems, in which emergent global patterns and adaptive, individual elements of systems interact. Cause and effect are entangled, with the emergence of global patterns depending on the idea of self-organisation of individual elements. The sensitivity of individual elements' behaviour to context and small variations highlights both the path dependence of patterns in a system and non-linearity. Episodic stability and order emerge as elements of a system continually interact to produce patterns that can be recognised; stability is dynamic.

The concepts highlighted are representative of a consensus amongst writers on defining concepts in complexity, and those concepts most readily and frequently translated into the social field. They have been used, as Alhadeff-Jones puts it, as

a new vocabulary to interpret reality. (Alhadeff-Jones, 2008 pg. 77)

The translation of complexity concepts from the domain of sciences to human social settings is important to this discussion. Mitleton-Kelly puts it this way:

characteristics and behaviour cannot be mapped directly from one domain to another, without a rigorous process of testing for appropriateness and relevance. (Mittleton-Kelly, 2003 pg. 28)

The discussion that follows reviews the conceptual basis for adopting a complexity perspective. I thus concentrate on descriptive and qualitative applications of complexity concepts whilst acknowledging the extensive work applying quantitative methods to model social systems (Bonabeau, 2002), and to analyse and make forecasts for large-scale human social systems (Room, 2011).

## **Translating Complexity Ideas**

[Complexity theory] offers a metaphor, or a lens, through which we might better understand what it takes to initiate and to sustain systemic change. (Mason, 2016 pg. 42)

Mason explicitly uses complexity concepts metaphorically, the example of systemic change he is considering in the citation being the governance of education at a national level (Burns & Koster, 2016). Complexity concepts are commonly translated to social settings as metaphor. Similarities or parallels are observed between phenomena in the biological and social sciences for instance, and complexity concepts used in biology are applied to describe or analyse social phenomena.

Mason's use of complexity concepts metaphorically is not suggesting that the nature of interactions between neurons in the brain, for example, is literally the same as processes of governance of national education administrations, but that the concepts offer insights into social systems and potential prompts for action (Mason, 2016; Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000; J. Chapman, 2004). Stacey nevertheless sounds a caution about such metaphorical use:

it is all too easy to make loose, unjustifiable translations of concepts from the complexity sciences into organizational frameworks. (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000 pg. 2)

Selected applications are reviewed below that exemplify metaphorical translation.

Pawson (2013), reflecting on conducting evaluations of interventions in public policy says:

Interventions are complex systems inserted into complex systems. Programmes are complex because they have human subjects and have to connect with the whole range of human reasoning ... because they are implemented in different contexts with different admixtures of stakeholders operating to different rules and traditions and because they are located at specific points in history with what has happened before influencing what happens now ... because their enactment has emergent effects and thus may change the original conditions. (Pawson, 2013 pg. 52)

Pawson mentions systems, the influence of context on how events unfold, and path dependence as a consequence of history. Human agency is likened to self-organisation, implicitly assuming that the effect in terms of emergence is the same in the social context as in contexts in which the concepts originated. Pawson uses the concepts as metaphor, the 'lens' of complexity (Mason, op. cit.) arguably offering insights into social systems.

Fullan (1993; 1999; 2003) explored and applied complexity concepts in relation to efforts at regional and national scales to change practice in schools. His influential model argued for national government, district and school-level efforts to be aligned, and proposed ways to also develop and encourage lateral networks between schools and leaders.

The context for this research study can be described using complexity concepts in a relatively loose metaphorical way. Taking one feature, the history of relationships between schools in a local area and the agency of particular individuals in leadership positions, influences which schools come together and how they organise and co-ordinate activity (Greany & Higham, 2018). Sensitivity to context and history and self-organisation amongst leaders and schools influences the local patterns of organisation that are established. Patterns evident at a national scale emerge from many separate, local circumstances in unpredictable ways. Reframing observed

features of the context of schools in England in terms of complexity concepts is similar to the way the concepts are used by Mason and Fullan.

Burns and Koster (2016) explore governance in a range of national settings, identifying trust as a theme that runs through all their findings. Trust is a quality of relationships, highlighting the central importance of interactions. James and Hawkins (2017) focus on individual schools and conceptualise them as co-evolving, loosely linked systems, identifying groups like staff or students as the systems. They also focus on analysis of interactions to understand processes by which patterns and stable features emerge. Burns and Koster and James and Hawkins arguably begin to consider the underlying social processes that are taking place when they make use of complexity concepts such as self-organisation. The focus of my research is to understand how leadership is enacted, also suggesting consideration of social processes. A complexity perspective is therefore needed that goes beyond a loose metaphorical translation of concepts.

Stacey, Griffin and Shaw (2000) make a sharp critique of the loose translation of complexity ideas into the social domain, arguing that their use in this way presents

complex systems as objective realities that scientists can stand outside of ... and see their modelling work as a route to increasing the ability of humans to control complex worlds. (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000 pg. 9)

Central to the critique is that no one can step outside the human social systems to which they are applying complexity ideas and see the 'system as a whole', the leader or researcher are themselves involved in the local interactions:

If organizations are metaphorically or analogically like complex adaptive systems then managers are agents in those systems ... They are participants unable to step outside ... The dynamics and the emergent behaviour arise through their participation not their acts of design. (ibid pg. 206)

Stacey's thinking presents a challenge. Arguably, the work of Fullan, Mason, and to an extent Burns, can be seen as discussing complex systems 'as if' we were standing outside them and able to control or manage them in some way. Fullan recognises the

implication of complexity. For example:

complexity is the operative paradigm which means that systems can't be managed and that reforms rarely unfold as planned (Fullan, 2003 pg. 9)

but he nevertheless applies concepts in a loose metaphoric way to suggest how to 'manage' such systems.

Stacey et al. (ibid.), arguing that looser, metaphorical thinking in terms of complex systems reifies systems, giving them existence and agency separate from the human interactions of which they are comprised, removed the concept of systems from their application of complexity to human organisations. They developed the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000; Stacey, 2007).

Thinking in terms of complex responsive processes means considering managers or leaders as part of the flow of interaction and communication between people that constitute the 'system'. The focus is on the nature of interaction and communication between people within organisations. The word 'system' is thus better understood as a shorthand for processes that result in emergent patterns. Individuals or groups experience systemic effects, but no one can step outside those processes. Leaders cannot determine patterns of interaction or choose the future of their organisation which will emerge from interactions; they do not have control.

Leaders and managers as participants, not designers, do nevertheless have influence. The perspective offers a way of understanding the nature of the organisations in which leaders act and whose future they seek to influence. It means concentrating on the processes which take place through interactions, direct or indirect, between people individually and in groups.

Developing a conceptual framework to guide both empirical work and analysis that

follows from the complexity perspective described, requires attention to the nature of interactions, the processes they constitute, and to the emergent patterns of interaction. Sensemaking and Social Network Analysis respectively offer the potential for such insights.

## **Introducing Sensemaking: Complexity and Organising**

The perspective of Complex Responsive Processes focuses on people's communication, relationships and interactions in organisations:

(a) move towards an understanding of human action as being in its essence a process of sense making. (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000 pg. 2)

The reference to sensemaking suggests the work of Weick (1995; 2005), whose work on sensemaking is now an influential perspective on thinking about organisations generally (Brown, Colville & Pye, 2015; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). As Weick puts it:

To focus on sensemaking is to portray organising as the experience of being thrown into an ongoing, unknowable, unpredictable, streaming of experience in search of answers to the question 'What's the story?' (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005 pg. 410)

In Weick's formulation, sensemaking is not simply an individual process of thinking and response, although it necessarily involves that, but an active social process in which explicit understandings shared between people emerge and guide action:

sensemaking can be treated as reciprocal exchanges between actors (Enactment) and their environments (Ecological Change) that are made meaningful (Selection) and preserved (Retention). (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005 pg. 414)

Although relatively underused in educational writing about leadership (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017), there is a body of educational leadership literature drawing on

sensemaking (B. L. Johnson & Kruse, 2019), and sensemaking is widely used in organisational studies more generally.

The broad cyclical sequence of Enactment, Selection and Retention is based on Weick's proposal of seven elements of sensemaking that he described as:

a guideline for enquiry ... like an observers manual. (Weick, 1995 pg. 18)

The seven elements are: that sensemaking is social; grounded in identity construction; retrospective; focused on and by cues; ongoing; driven by plausibility; and enactive of sensible environments (ibid.). People select from what they notice in the flow of interaction and communication into which they have acted, giving meaning to it by relating cues to frames of thinking, retaining plausible stories that sustain, solidify or update identities that guide further action; their 'sense' is enacted back into the environment. The 'sense' that is made and the understanding of what to do is, in Weick's construction, overt and shared between people: it is a social, collective and continuing process.

Weick himself links the experience of complexity to sensemaking. Weick refers to 'chaos':

In place of Chaos, I talked about ambivalence, equivocality, ambiguity, and the unexpected. (Weick, 2005 pg. 67)

Ambivalence captures the idea of holding apparently contradictory or paradoxical ideas, equivocality the idea of uncertain outcomes, and ambiguity of unclear meanings. Experiencing these, or the unexpected, are stimuli for sensemaking. Making the link again, Weick argues:

if complexity ideas are made more cognitive and more relational, they look like human sensemaking. (ibid. pg. 51)

Stacey et al., from the perspective of complexity and placing interactions between people at the heart of self-organisation, essentially describe sensemaking:

people jointly create the meaning of what they are doing when they act into the unknown, co-creating their future in interaction with others. (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000 pg. 194)

Sensemaking thus provides a set of ideas, used within the broad framework of a complexity perspective, that can give an insight into the micro-processes of responses to complexity. Weick's 'observer's manual' of concepts forms part of the conceptual framework for this study.

## **Introducing Social Network Analysis: Complexity and Patterns of Relationships**

A feature of the complexity perspective I have set out is that the nature and patterns of interaction between people are as important as their individual characteristics in determining the nature of organisations. This same consideration is a foundational element of Social Network Analysis (SNA) (Borgatti & Foster, 2003). Balkundi and Kilduff characterise the key ideas thus:

the importance of relations between organizational actors, actors' embeddedness in social fields, the social utility of network connections, and the structural patterning of social life (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2005 pg. 942)

Embeddedness and social utility relate to the nature and consequence of interactions. Social fields can be understood as forming part of the environment and, thinking in terms of complex responsive processes, are themselves emergent. The important additional feature that network theory brings, is to address connections and the structural patterning of relations between people.

In SNA a network is considered to be a collection of actors (nodes) and the connections between them (ties) (Borgatti, M. G. Everett & J. C. Johnson, 2013). Any structuring of patterns, in terms of between whom there are relationships, will emerge from the way interactions occur. SNA offers approaches to conceptualising and analysing how networks and structuring may influence behaviours.

Thinking about SNA alongside the complexity perspective and sensemaking constructs 'ties' between actors as comprising processes of interaction and sensemaking. Relations between people constitute the networks. Participants' perceptions of networks of relations are described as social cognition (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 2009; Halgin & Borgatti, 2012); the importance of recognising the socially constructed nature of networks is that people act on such cognitions (ibid.). The application of SNA, with the assumption of networks representing social cognition, is another element of the conceptual framework.

## **2.2 Complexity, Sensemaking, Social Networks and Implications for this Research**

I have argued that, whilst the metaphorical use of complexity concepts offers insights and provides a basis on which to offer prescriptions for responding to manifestly complex and unpredictable situations, to explore the enactment of leadership in an organisation like a MAT there is a need to go beyond the loose metaphorical translation of complexity concepts.

The relevance of complex responsive processes (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000; Stacey, 2007) for my research study is that it places peoples' communication, relationships and interactions in organisations at the centre of a conceptual framework, requiring us to interpret the generalised abstract concepts of complexity theories through the realities of people's experience and behaviour in organisations. Systemic features of the social world are thought of as emergent, consequences of

ongoing processes of which everyone is a part. No one is able to step outside these complex processes and emergent structuring. Leaders are participants in processes, rather than controlling their design, and act on their perceptions of systemic, emergent features in their interactions and actions (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000; Mead 1932).

A key feature of people's experience is, arguably, paradox, uncertainty and ambiguity. Stacey suggests people experience:

emergent change that is paradoxical in that it is both predictable and unpredictable, known and unknown, stable and unstable. (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000 pg. 192)

I noted, for example, that leaders like George, whom I introduced as the CEO of NMAT, were in an environment where much was familiar about schools, but there was at the same time constant change and novel situations.

Organisations are thus conceptualised as ongoing networks of communication and interactions in which everyone is embedded, interacting with a wider environment in which there are stable, but emergent and co-evolving patterns and, from the perspective of individuals, structured features and systemic effects.

Sensemaking offers the scope to analyse interactions with a perspective emphasising continuing, dynamic processes, a process-discursive as opposed to an institutional-cognitivist perspective (Eddy-Spicer, 2019). SNA gives the potential to map and analyse the networks of ongoing communication and interaction in which people are embedded, networks that are based on social cognition (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 2009).

Sensemaking is open to critiques of minimising the potential for conflicting goals and accounts (Brown, Colville & Pye, 2015) and of taking insufficient account of politics and power (Helms Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010). This means that caution should be exercised in relation to assuming the absence of conflict or tensions, and recognition

given to the potential for divergent understandings and ‘senses’ to emerge.

Other studies have explored the dynamics of complex social systems in education using SNA (Sleegers, Moolenaar & Daly, 2019), and noted and explored the potential for investigating sensemaking processes using SNA (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Oliver & Montgomery, 2008). The conceptual framework developed for this study, beginning with the complexity perspective I have introduced, brings complexity, sensemaking and SNA together to investigate leadership, the focus of this study. Sensemaking is conceived of as process involving interactions between people, a social and collective process. The SNA approach emphasises exploring perceptions of networks, described as social cognition, and thus offers the scope to explore the patterns and structures perceived in the interactions through which sensemaking occurs. The implications for the conceptualisation of leadership are now considered.

## 2.3 Leadership

### **Leadership: Complex Responsive Processes and Relational**

#### **Leadership**

Yukl defines leadership as:

an intentional process of influencing individuals and groups to guide structure and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or organisation. (Yukl, 2013 pg. 19)

The process of influencing individuals and groups directs our attention to interactions and how influence arises. A consequence of conceptualising organisations as ongoing networks of communication and interaction suggests interplay between many different influences and the agency of many individuals and groups. There is not a single source of ‘intention’, and individuals or groups may experience divergent, even conflicting intentions in terms of influence.

Thinking of interactions does not mean simply direct, person-to-person interaction, but recognises group and social processes. Stacey (2000) draws on Mead (1932) in discussing how influences arise which are collective, in that they arise from a group, whether the immediate organisation or the wider environment. Collective influences are taken up in individuals' interactions, in that individuals behave with internalised assumptions of how they are seen by others and of the nature of collective understandings (Stacey, Mead *ibid.*). The process is central to individuals' sense of self and identity, and the consequences are emergent.

This discussion thus constructs leadership as influence and as arising in interactions between individuals and groups: a relational view of leadership. Leadership is being produced in processes of people relating and communicating (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The essence of leadership is that it is spread amongst and between many individuals as well as the collective and the wider context. People are embedded in webs or networks of interaction and communication in which leadership is produced.

If the essence of leadership is that it is relational,

'finding' the locus of leadership means looking into the 'space between' – inquiring into the nature of relationships throughout the organization. (Hazy, Goldstein & Lichtenstein, 2007 pg. 28)

Leadership is to be found, and influence concentrated, in the networks of interaction and communication. Designated leaders and managers are participants in networks, not designers, but that does not mean that they have no influence. The conceptualisation offers a way of understanding how influence arises and contextualising the role of leaders. There will be multiple loci of leadership or, following Yukl's formulation (*ibid.*), sources of intention. Multiple loci notwithstanding, it will be the case that some loci of leadership will be more significant and influential than others.

Categorising loci of leadership facilitates analysis, albeit creating categories

necessarily involves some selection and loss of nuance in the variety of social interaction. Hernandez et al. (2011), reviewing a wide range of literature, developed a typology of leadership theories distinguishing how different theories viewed sources or loci of leadership and the transmission of influence. Hernandez developed five categories that offer a useful heuristic with which to distinguish loci empirically.

The five categories are: Leader, Dyad, Followers, Collective and Context. Leader refers to those with recognised roles and Follower to those without. The locus of Leader is a single source of influence on all people in the organisation; Dyad is the direct interaction between the Leader and another individual; Followers is a group acting together independently of Leaders; Collective is the influence of a group or organisation as a whole; Context is the influence of the context or wider environment.

Hernandez et al.'s typology also addresses 'mechanisms' or processes by which leadership and influence flow. They distinguished between the traits and behaviours of people and the way individuals engage in interaction, whether through conscious and deliberate thought, or feelings and emotions. The four mechanisms are: Traits, Behaviours, Cognition and Affect.

The five loci proposed are not unproblematic. For example, in a complex organisation, it is likely that individuals could be designated Leaders and Followers, meaning categories for loci and mechanisms should not be considered mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, the schema is a promising heuristic device for capturing the variety of influencing relationships within an organisation.

Leadership is thus conceptualised as relational, and produced in interactions between people through a variety of mechanisms. The multiple sources of leadership are exemplified by Hernandez's five broadly defined loci. Influence is notably more focused in some loci compared to others. For example, identifying an individual Leader as a locus contrasts with the influence of Followers as a group. Context

captures the relevance of the particular circumstances and influences from beyond a group. Importantly, the conception is that the multiple influences co-exist simultaneously in any particular context and are a feature of people's organising.

Thinking of leadership as relational risks treating all interactions as equivalent, underplaying the experience of individuals and groups of being constrained in relationships. As I have already noted, some loci of leadership and influence are more significant than others. The notion of constraining and enabling is one way of conceiving how power is experienced, in other words, as a feature of people relating (Elias (1978), cited by Stacey (2000)). As multiple loci interact with varying degrees and concentrations of influence, the balance of constraining and enabling will be emergent. Stacey (ibid.) cites Elias in referring to this emergent balance as a 'figuration of power' (ibid.).

The conceptualisation of leadership as relational is a direct consequence of a complexity perspective building on Stacey's formulation of complex responsive processes. The idea of relational leadership leads directly to and necessitates inquiry into the nature of relationships throughout and between organisations (Hazy, op. cit. pg. 28), an essential element of the conceptual framework for this research.

I now consider key literature on educational leadership in the context of the conceptualisation of leadership as relational.

### **Leadership: Educational and Executive**

Leadership research in education has been very wide-ranging over recent decades. Day and Armstrong (2015) suggest five broad strands in English leadership research, recognising even these are not fully comprehensive: the work of head teachers in schools in challenging circumstances; effective successful school principalship in improving schools; distributed leadership; leadership policy effects and critical

reflection; system leadership.

My research focused on leadership in a group of schools organised in a MAT, and further on educational improvement. Leadership in a MAT is located broadly in the strand of System Leadership. I am referring to the leadership beyond schools in the specific context of a MAT as executive leadership, recognising the term's widespread use in a range of multi-school groups with formalised sources of central co-ordination (National College, 2010; Matthews et al., 2011; Hill et al., 2012; Woods & Roberts, 2014), albeit there is variation and imprecision in its use (Lord et al., 2016).

Improvement work relates to the strand of principalship in improving schools to which Day and Armstrong refer. The literature they summarise relates primarily to individual schools and most commonly the actions of principals and headteachers (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2019; Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016). The large body of school improvement literature they review works with quite sharply defined conceptions of improvement. For example Day and Armstrong cite a study at length that they suggest is representative, that explored improvement in terms of:

the impact of heads in academically improved and effective primary and secondary schools upon pupil outcomes (Day and Armstrong, 2015 pg. 254)

The notion of improvement in the quote is focused on academic achievement and pupils' performance in tests and externally administered assessments. Others have argued for a broader view of improvement (Wrigley, 2003; Wrigley, Thomson & Lingard, 2011) considering broader outcomes for pupils and aspects of schools' curriculums. Further, the context of executive leadership in a MAT is a new context in which to consider improvement.

Exploring improvement in a new context and the scope for thinking about improvement in different ways, led to the decision to approach empirical work with the meaning, scope and practices in relation to improvement loosely defined. The meaning of improvement was not defined in advance in the widely used terms set out by Day and Armstrong (ibid). In order to understand how leaders thought about

improvement in the new executive roles, the proposed approach was to consider improvement as educational activities that in some way sought to have a greater desired impact on pupils. The nature of the desired impact and educational activities were not defined in advance. In this way the research would explore the understandings and mindset that executive leaders brought to their roles, allowing them to articulate what they meant by educational improvement and its intended impact on pupils. The extant literature is thus referenced mainly in the findings and discussion in Chapters 4 and 6 as a reference point for the empirical findings.

### ***Plural and Distributed Leadership***

In education, the insight that many people are involved in leadership and that there are many sources of influence has been commonly discussed in terms of distributed leadership (Day & Armstrong, 2015). Denis, Langley & Sergi (2012), however, reviewing a broad range of leadership literature dealing with the idea of many people involved in leadership, observe the variety of terms in use. Bolden (2011), in a review of distributed leadership research, cites shared, collective, collaborative, emergent, and co-leadership in addition to distributed. Denis, Langley & Sergi (ibid.) add integrative, relational, and post-heroic.

Denis, Langley & Sergi offer plural leadership as a more general term, but argue there are nevertheless some discrete areas of focus within the spectrum of terms, and identify four broad streams of research (ibid pg. 219): 'Sharing Leadership for team effectiveness', referring to groups of people and mutual leadership with members leading each other; 'Pooling Leadership at the top to direct others' – small groups (dyads or triads) as joint organisational leaders; 'Spreading Leadership within and across levels in an organisation over time' i.e. distributed leadership; and 'Producing Leadership within interactions' – leadership as an emergent property of relationships.

Shared, pooled and spread or distributed are helpful and distinct ways of characterising patterns of leadership. The relational leadership perspective I have

outlined clearly aligns with the last of Denis' themes, but arguably can be seen as a process through which the other patterns emerge. Denis' categories imply different loci; pooling refers to dyads or triads, for example, whereas sharing leadership refers to a larger group. Shared, pooled and distributed can thus be thought of as both distinct ways in which leadership may be enacted, and as referring to particular 'loci of influence' similar to categories defined by Hernandez (op. cit.).

The idea of plural leadership thus contextualises the use of distributed in education literature and distinguishes distributed leadership as one way in which multiple people are involved in leadership. Distributed leadership, I will argue, is potentially too narrow a concept to allow fully for the nature of a complex environment.

Distributed Leadership (DL) developed as an analytic concept and focuses on leadership activities that people carry out together, referred to as practices, rather than the attributes and behaviours of individual designated leaders. Spillane (2004; 2006) and Gronn (2003), for example, as influential writers on DL, developed frameworks in which the focus, or unit of analysis, was leadership practices, and analysed who was participating in these practices and how practices were coordinated as they were carried out in different contexts. Examples of practices specifically related to leadership might be planning, or professional development (Camburn, Spillane & Sebastian, 2010; Earley & Bubb, 2013).

Whilst recognising the breadth and volume of literature on distributed leadership (Bennett et al., 2003; Tian, Risku & Collin, 2015), the discussion here concentrates on Spillane and Gronn as two writers whose foundational work exemplifies the use of distributed leadership as an analytic concept and also its limitations.

Spillane (Spillane, 2006) conceived of DL as 'stretched over' leaders, followers and context as practices are enacted:

Leadership is the activities engaged in by leaders in interaction with others in particular contexts around specific tasks. (Spillane, 2006 pg. 5)

He identified three ways in which practices may be enacted by multiple actors: collaborated, collective and coordinated, distinguishing between people working together directly, in parallel, or in sequences over time. This conception is rooted in the idea of 'activities engaged in by leaders *in interaction with others*' (my italics).

Gronn's formulation referred to conjoint, concertive action, again by many people (Gronn, 2003), and also focused on enacting practices. Gronn identified spontaneous, intuitive, and institutionalised as types of cooperation which characterise the means of coordination, referring to the way individuals engage in co-working, with terms like spontaneous and intuitive. These arguably reference something about the nature of interactions, not simply their patterning.

Spillane and Gronn both focus on practices and, linked with sensemaking, practices can be seen as enactments of activities around specific tasks (Spillane, op. cit.). Leadership in the context of a group is enacted through practices. To that extent, both Spillane and Gronn conceive of leadership being produced in relationships. They also exemplify an important point Denis et al. make about plural leadership literature more generally, however:

There is an implicit assumption in almost all of the literature on plural leadership that plurality (whether mutual or coalitional) necessarily implies convergence around common goals and directions. (Denis, Langley & Sergi, 2012 pg. 269)

The discussion of distribution I have outlined is in relation to achieving shared purposes and enacting commonly understood practices. The literature on distributed leadership largely shares the implicit assumption of common goals.

The idea of distributed leadership has become not just an analytic framework but is promoted as a desirable practice (Tian, Risku & Collin, 2015; Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2008), and researched in terms of how best to achieve it and what

constitutes an effective model, with the underlying assumption that it will lead to more effective schools (Macbeath, Oduro & Waterhouse, 2004; Day & Leithwood, 2007; Harris, 2009). Constructs to measure the extent of distributed leadership have been developed and monitored and compared in different countries through international surveys (OECD, 2016).

The assumption of common goals and the presumption of distribution as being automatically effective risks ignoring or glossing over the potential for influences to be in tension. Goals may not be shared, and may even be competing. To ignore or underplay that some actors carry greater influence, and that some norms and values when taken up in interactions are constraining, is to miss essential elements of behaviour in organisations. One critique of DL, therefore, is that insufficient attention is paid to the dynamics of power (Lumby, 2013; Gunter, Hall & Bragg, 2013).

Considering leadership in schools only through the lens of distributed leadership, or presenting DL as a normative or ideal form, leads to tensions and paradoxes. The assumption that leadership can be distributed as an active decision of a headteacher implies that loci of influence and associated intentions can be controlled or determined by a single designated leader, and is potentially at odds with the idea that DL is somehow democratic (Woods & Gronn, 2009). Recognising multiple loci of leadership also meant recognising that some had greater concentrations of influence than others. DL as an analytic concept does not fully address the emergent nature of leadership in organisations.

### ***Leadership Configurations and Enacting Practices***

Gronn recognised the limitations of DL and that what he referred to as ‘influence-based relationships’ in terms of leadership may occur in different patterns, suggesting:

a diversified and mixed combination of solo performance in combination with dyadic, team and other multi-party formations ... ‘hybrid’ is the most credible

term for capturing this complexity and fluidity. (Gronn, 2009 pg. 389)

Gronn uses the term hybrid leadership, in contrast to distributed, to capture the notion that influence may be more or less focused on an individual, and involve collective or plural efforts with distinct characteristics (ibid.). The specific combination or patterning of different loci that may arise in a particular organisation at a particular time Gronn proposed calling a leadership configuration. Gronn's analysis, in the context of educational leadership, strongly parallels the thinking of Hernandez and Denis outlined above, in terms of recognising diverse and mixed combinations of influencing relationships. In Gronn's characterisation, hybrid patterns constitute a configuration in a particular context.

Gronn's notion of hybrid patterns constituting the leadership configuration in a context thus forms another key element of the conceptual framework. It makes more specific the focus on interactions and follows from the understanding that leaders are participants not designers of the patterned networks of relationships.

The discussion of SNA in the first part of this chapter emphasised that the patterned networks will be those relationships perceived by the participants, selected in the context of the social process of sensemaking, and characterised as social cognition (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 2009; Halgin & Borgatti, 2012). Investigating networks by taking into account all of the perceived relationships in a group from the perspective of each person involved was pioneered by Krackhardt (1987). Gronn recognised the potential for using SNA to explore leadership configurations (Gronn, 2009 pg. 390). I am proposing that the pattern of relationships constituting a leadership configuration in a particular context is conceived of and investigated as the patterns of leadership relationships perceived by those involved. Krackhardt called the perceptions of the relationships in a group Cognitive Social Structures (ibid.). The leadership configuration would thus be the Cognitive Social Structures (CSS) perceived by participants.

The categories of the loci of leadership provide a basis for recognising the combination of patterns which form a leadership configuration in a particular context. Influencing relationships may be in tension, however, and actual figurations of influence and power will be emergent (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000).

Empirical studies have proposed areas of practice that describe the range of leadership activities in which headteachers or principals in individual schools are involved (Earley & Bubb, 2013; Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016; Sebastian, Camburn & Spillane, 2017). Camburn et al. (2010), for example, grouped observed practices into the domains of: school management; instructional leadership; planning and setting goals; boundary spanning; and personal development.

The domains provide a starting point for research into executive leadership in MATs. The categories are broadly similar to those identified in early research into what leaders in MATs were doing (Hill et al., 2012). The conceptualisation developed for this study means the empirical focus on practices extends beyond that of the cited studies of Camburn and Hill. The nature of executive leadership is to influence schools as separate institutions, involving formal and informal relationships between, as well as within, them; further, the focus is not solely on the principal executive leader. The categories may therefore be changed and extended.

## **2.4 Conceptual Framework and Research Questions Revisited**

The discussion in this chapter has introduced the elements of a conceptual framework to guide this research. Complexity theories are the underpinning perspective, and the approach adopted means people's communication, relationships and interactions in organisations are at the centre of the conceptual framework. Organisations are conceptualised as ongoing networks of communication and interaction in which everyone is embedded. The complexity perspective and conceptualisation of an organisation adopted shapes how leadership

is understood and applied in the context of education. Leaders, and all those involved, are participants, rather than designers, of processes, and act on their perceptions of systemic, emergent features in their interactions.

The central understanding is that leadership, considered as influence with intention, is produced in processes of people relating and communicating, a relational view. Applying this to an organisation means recognising that there are multiple sources or loci of influence, and thus multiple intentions. Importantly, loci are conceived of being variously constituted, including by individuals, small groups, collectives and wider social contexts.

The processes of interaction can be understood in terms of sensemaking a social process, of 'exchanges between actors and their environments that are made meaningful and preserved' (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005 pg. 410) Participants' socially constructed perceptions of relationships can be understood as patterned networks of relationships, and analysed drawing on Social Network Analysis and the idea of Cognitive Social Structures in particular (Krackhardt, 1987). Recognising that some loci of leadership will be more influential than others, emergent figurations of power (Griffin & Stacey, 2006) will shape the patterning of networks.

The broad principles of complex responsive processes, relational leadership, sensemaking and social network analysis applied to cognitive social structures, are related to the educational context of executive leadership and educational improvement in a MAT. The specific application of people's communication, relationships and interaction is the enactment of leadership practices for improvement.

The conceptual framework thus draws on Gronn's conception of a leadership configuration (Gronn, 2009) as the characterisation of the emergent patterning of

relationships. A configuration is a hybrid combination of the patterns of influencing relationships in a context (ibid.). The configuration, in this conceptual framework, is based on the socially constructed perceptions of participants.

Fig. 1 is a visual summary of the main elements of the conceptual framework. Configurations are shown as emerging from the enactment of practices as sensemaking takes place in interactions. The loci of leadership are illustrated using the categories proposed by Hernandez et al. (op. cit.), with Leader, Dyad, Collective and Followers arising from within the group and Context being external. The perceived boundary between the organisation and context is itself subjective and part of the inquiry.

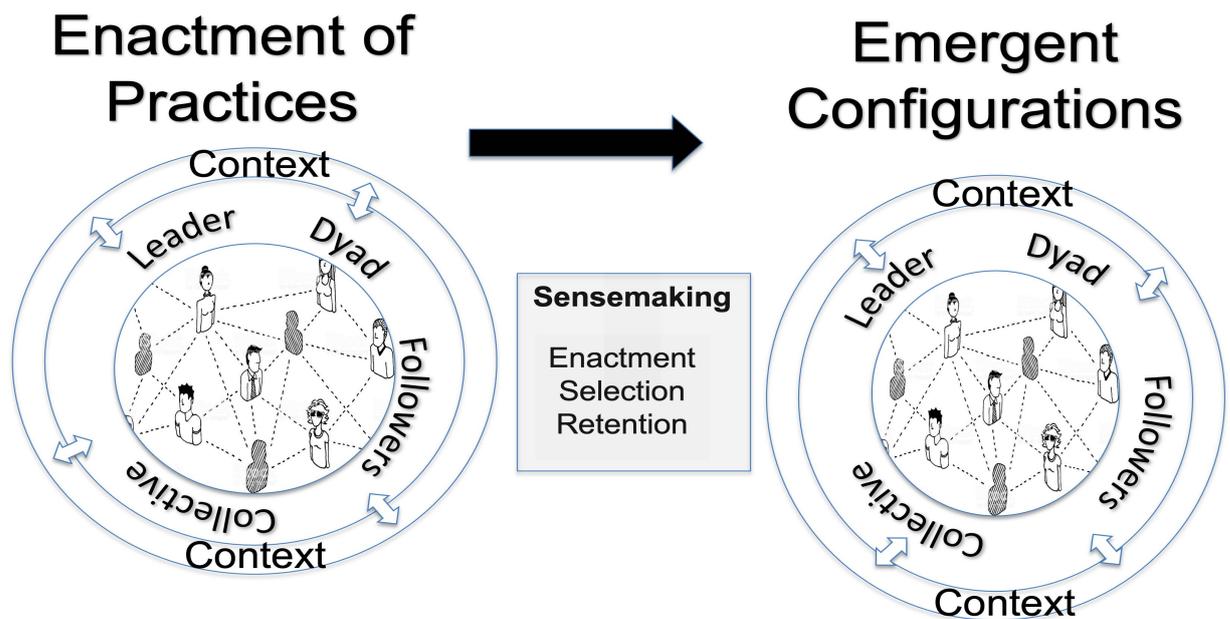


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework - Enactment of practices and emergent configurations

## Research Questions

The conceptual framework outlined suggests focusing the two broad research questions further with sub-questions that reflect practices, the processes of sensemaking taking place in interactions, and the patterning of interactions that

constitute leadership relationships.

Firstly in relation to the executive leader:

1. How does an Executive Leader seek to bring about educational improvement in a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT)?

Sub questions

- a. What practices does an EL seek to enact, with leaders who are acting beyond individual schools in the MAT, to bring about educational improvement?
- b. What frames, narratives and identities does the EL draw on to describe and explain the practices they seek to select and retain as they bring about educational improvement?

Secondly in relation to others involved in leadership:

2. What patterns of leadership relations emerge beyond individual schools in a MAT?

Sub questions

- a. What are the patterns in the enactment of practices by leaders acting beyond individual schools in the MAT to bring about educational improvement?
- b. What frames, narratives and identities do leaders acting beyond individual schools in the MAT draw on to describe and explain their practices and patterns of relations?

# Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

This chapter introduces the design of the empirical work for this study drawing on the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2.

I begin by outlining the ontological and epistemological basis for the design, proposing a complex realist stance (Reed & Harvey, 1992) as relevant for this research, in which knowledge is socially constructed but reflective of a complex reality beyond individuals.

I then outline the strategy for the inquiry, based on taking a case study approach and developing a mixture of qualitative and network methods to explore the meaning, significance and patterning of leadership relationships in 'qualitative networks' (Bellotti, 2014).

The design of the specific methods will be set out, including: how the case was identified; a sample of interviewees determined based on the egocentric network of an Executive Leader; and interviews designed to collect both network and different types of qualitative data. The implementation of the methods is described and the approach to the subsequent analysis is outlined.

### **3.1 Ontology and Epistemology: Complex Realism**

The conceptual framework emphasises ongoing relationships and processes of communication between people. The emphasis on process and participation does not mean that the insights of social sciences such as the structuring and reproduction of social relations, or phenomena in the social world that have real impacts and influence on people, are not relevant. Byrne (Byrne & Callaghan, 2013 pg. 8), drawing on Reed and Harvey (Reed & Harvey, 1992; Harvey, 2002), argues that large-scale patterning of social structures is 'relatively permanent' from the point of view of an individual or an organisation, albeit evolving and as the consequence of human activity (Byrne, *ibid.* pg. 49). Byrne cites Kincaid (Kincaid, 2012) approvingly as

describing this as

individual behaviour acting in a pre-existing institutional and social context  
(Byrne *ibid.*, pg. 51)

The institutional and social context into which executive leaders in a MAT act cannot be reduced to, or explained, simply by those leaders' actions in their own situation. Their actions are clearly influenced, constrained and enabled by the institutional and social context beyond the MAT. In essence, whilst thinking of the wider context of an organisation like a MAT as emergent, developing from human activity and agency, we also recognise how enduring and persistent the patterns are, and how real their impact. Byrne (*op. cit.*), and Reed and Harvey (*op. cit.*) characterise the understanding of a complex, emergent, socially constructed reality as a complex realist view, in that it developed from the ideas of Bhaskar's critical realism (1989).

Byrne argues, for example, that the ontology is layered. The institutional and social context could be considered to be different levels or layers from the specific circumstances of a MAT in an ontology. The processes that connect the levels are not immediately discerned simply by observing what occurs locally in the context of a MAT. The levels can be considered mutually influencing and co-evolving (Mitleton-Kelly, 2003), nevertheless. Complex processes are reflected in the idea that the mechanisms or processes that connect the levels arise from the many, various and widely distributed activities of people and groups over time.

Referring to levels and layers raises questions about how boundaries between levels might be determined. Following Cilliers again (2001 pg. 140), boundaries between the environment and a perceived system or organisation, for example, are to some extent subjective, but where they can be drawn is constrained by the real ebb and flow of interaction independently of any individual's perception; boundaries are not arbitrary. The discussion of boundaries and of perceptions of institutional and social contexts emphasises I am taking a realist perspective of a complex social world, alongside the epistemological point that what can be known is necessarily socially

produced and constructed.

The emphasis on ongoing relationships and processes of communication between people in the conceptual framework means that individuals' experience of complexity, as leadership practices are enacted, is central to how knowledge is created. There will be multiple perspectives and interpretations, including my own as a researcher. Sensemaking has been introduced as an approach to analysing the social process of creating meaning. The structuring and patterns in the social processes have an influence on meanings created, and Social Network Analysis, conceived of as exploring social cognition of participants, has been introduced as an approach to analysing the patterns in the social processes.

The Complex Realist perspective is, pragmatically, a relevant framing for this particular investigation. It accommodates the real impact of features of the wider environment whilst recognising the emergent nature of leadership arising through the interactions of individuals in a context. Knowledge is socially constructed in a Complex Realist perspective, and collective and shared understandings are emergent whilst grounded in a reality beyond individuals. Specific methods are not implied, but the approach to the design of the study, and the analysis and interpretation of data, are necessarily affected.

## **3.2 Methodology**

The research questions address how executive leaders in a MAT seek to bring about improvement and consequent emerging patterns of leadership. The complexity perspective and the recognition of knowledge as socially constructed with multiple perspectives requires acknowledgement of the role of history and context in the intentions and thinking of leaders as practices are enacted, insight into the intentions and thinking of those involved in enacting the practices, insight into the practices themselves, and understanding and recognition of the patterning of relationships in

the specific context of a MAT.

Acknowledging context suggests taking a case study approach, the approach being predicated on understanding the particular circumstances of any data collected (L. Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013; Yin, 2017).

Cases recognise the complexity and embeddedness of social truths. (L. Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013 pg. 256)

The conceptual framework proposed sensemaking as an 'observers manual' (Weick, op. cit.) of concepts to guide observation and analysis of interaction and communication, and to understand not only what people are doing but also how and why. This suggests gathering rich qualitative data about what people say they are thinking and doing.

Exploring the patterning of relationships will draw on Social Network Analysis approaches in mapping those relationships and 'the spaces between' (Hazy, Goldstein & Lichtenstein op. cit.) in the organisation. SNA requires types of quantitative data and analysis.

A case study based design, collection and analysis of rich qualitative data, combined with some quantitative network approaches, form the basis of a strategy for the inquiry.

### **Case Study: Single Embedded Design**

Investigating cases allows reported actions and intentions of actors to be related to their context together with a deeper exploration of nuances and tensions. The design for this study was a single, embedded design. The 'single case' refers to the intention to focus on one MAT.

Subunits of analyses may be incorporated within the single-case study,

thereby creating a more complex (or embedded) design ... enhancing the insights into the single case. (Yin, 2017 pg. 52)

Individuals and organisations within the MAT can be thought of as cases within the case, as a MAT consists of multiple schools with many people involved in leadership.

The rationale and justification for a single case study design are that the focus and research questions for this study address the detailed processes and context of the enactment of executive leadership. As Yin puts it:

capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation ... because of the lessons it might provide about the social processes related to some theoretical interest. (Yin, 2017 pg. 50)

It is precisely the social processes in relation to leadership that are of interest. Choosing a case that represents a common example of a MAT provides scope for lessons and detailed insights into those processes. There is also the potential for a single case to be revelatory (*ibid.*), the everyday nature notwithstanding, in that, as I have argued, the context of a MAT and the experience of executive leadership is relatively under researched.

A weakness of a case study design is arguably the limited general validity and transferability of findings relating to a specific context, the risk of bias in the selection of cases, and the selection and interpretation of data used to characterise and explore cases. Investigating a number of cases, a multiple case study design (Yin, 2017), rather than a single case would allow for findings and analysis to be compared across cases, arguably strengthening the validity of insights.

The limitations of a single case study design can be mitigated, however. The conceptual framework means observations and analysis can be related to the framework and provide analytical insights that may be transferred. Single case study designs have been widely used in empirical investigations of sensemaking, for example (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

## **Defining Boundaries**

A Multi-Academy Trust and its principal Executive Leader (EL) are the initial and most concrete elements in defining the boundary of the case. A MAT is well defined as an organisation in that, as set out briefly in Chapter 1, there is a legally established Trust that holds a 'Funding Agreement' with the Department of Education in respect of the schools for which the Trust has responsibility. The initial focus of interest within the MAT is the formally designated executive leader of the trust.

The research questions are not focused on all activity within the MAT, however, or all people associated with the MAT. Influences on leadership practices for educational improvement enacted beyond and between individual schools within the MAT were specified. Improvement practices beyond individual schools are less concrete and well-defined elements, but do place boundaries on the scope of what is of interest in terms of the case. The boundaries beyond and between schools in the context of a MAT will thus be defined and adapted through the process of data gathering and analysis. The concrete elements of a MAT and the principal Executive Leader (EL) provide a starting point for selecting a case and designing the specific methods.

## **Mixing Methods: Qualitative and Network Data**

The collection and analysis of rich qualitative data, combined with some quantitative network approaches, form the basis of a strategy for the inquiry. In methodological terms, using qualitative and network methods is not simply a matter of collecting two different types of data and analysing them separately. The qualitative data will give context, meaning and significance to the network data and analysis. More fundamentally, the design of the methods for SNA will be influenced by the qualitative approach. Social networks mapped in the research will thus be considered Qualitative Networks following Bellotti (2014), highlighting the role of qualitative data collection and analysis in both the design of network methods and the interpretation of network

data.

Inquiry into the combination of the patterns of influencing relationships in a context, referred to as the configuration of leadership relationships (Gronn, 2009), will be based on the socially constructed perceptions of participants.

Krackhardt (1987) pioneered Investigating Cognitive Social Structures (ibid.), the perception of all the relationships in a group from the point of view of an individual. He proposed ways in which separate, individually perceived Cognitive Social Structures (CSS) can be combined to infer a consensus. In the context of this study, the CSS of interest will be those that include people perceived by participants to be involved in leadership practices.

To take the point about individual perceptions further, Smith, Menon and Thompson (2011) proposed considering three levels of networks individuals may perceive: the potential network, the activated network and the mobilised network. The potential network is everyone an individual may come into contact with in any context. The activated network is the people who may come to an individual's mind in a given context with a particular stimulus. Cognitive activation implies that priming, for example, through questions or some other stimulus, can shape how network knowledge comes to mind. The mobilised network, a subset of the activated network, is people whom individuals perceive they actually call on and interact with for a particular purpose.

Individuals' perceptions of whom they interact with, and of other people's interactions, will have been influenced, or primed, by the design of research and the way it is presented to them. Describing the purpose of the research, the boundaries of the case, and collection of qualitative data will all prime perceptions.

The selections that individuals make provide a link to the use of sensemaking in the analysis of qualitative data. Selections reflect participants' perceptions of the interactions and social structures through which sensemaking takes place. Selections and consensus views of networks are also in themselves reflective of the shared understandings of the organisation and are an emergent consequence of sensemaking.

The network element of the inquiry will thus be designed with the understanding that the configuration will be based on the mobilised networks (Smith, Menon & Thompson, 2011) of those involved. The design of the qualitative elements of the study and the collection of network data are interwoven.

The people from whom network data may be collected are also a feature of the design of the study and will also depend on individuals' perceptions of their activated networks. The precise boundaries of the case will thus emerge in the process of collecting data and arise from individuals' perceptions. The definition of the case and the approach to collecting qualitative data will influence the design of the network methods and data collected by priming or framing the perceptions of participants.

Qualitative data about the significance of social ties identified in networks will also contribute to the analysis:

narrating social ties ... focuses attention on the subjective meaning and interpretation of network ties, and the way the network is perceived by the actor. (Crossley et al., 2019 pg. 109)

The qualitative material should contextualise structural mechanisms (Bellotti, 2014 pg. 75) in networks and offer insights into how leadership in the organisation is understood collectively by those involved.

The recognition of the inter-relationship between qualitative approaches and the use

of network methods will be reflected in the design and implementation of the specific methods used.

### 3.3 Methods

#### **Selecting the case**

The rationale for a single embedded case study design was to investigate a commonly occurring situation. The interpretation of ‘commonly occurring’ applied to this study was MATs that were similar, in broad terms, to a significant number of other MATs.

The features considered to establish apparent similarity were characteristics for which data was publicly available and relatively easy to identify: the number and type of schools in the MAT; how the schools compared to others in terms of measures of student performance widely in use; and the characteristics of the student population and their circumstances. The type of school refers to the phase of schooling (primary, secondary or specialist). Circumstances and characteristics of students refers to economic circumstances and the diversity of students in terms of ethnic background.

A MAT was considered if it shared the characteristics of the categories in which there were the largest number of MATs. Table 1 summarises the data used and the sources.

Characteristics of MATs
-------------------------

1144 MATs nationally responsible for a total of 6491 Schools

570 MATs are single phase, 574 mixed phase

61% of MATS had 5 or fewer schools

Mean Number of Schools is 5.8\*

57% of MATs have between 3 and 10 schools

Source: DfE Transparency Data ([www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-academies-and-academy-projects-in-development](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-academies-and-academy-projects-in-development) accessed 15/11/2018),

\*Calculated excluding organisations defined as MATs but responsible for only 1 school.

#### Performance Data and student characteristics

Performance: based on published national school performance measures at Key State 2 and 4 compared with national averages: national average for progress measures at KS2, 0.0 and for KS4, -0.03

Student characteristics: the national average for disadvantaged students\* 23% in Primary and 27% in Secondary; students for whom English is not their first language 21.2% in Primary, and 16.9% in Secondary.

Source: <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/schools-by-type?step=default&table=mats&hasperpdata=true&for=primary&basedon=Performance%20with%20school%20%26%20pupil%20numbers&datasetfilter=provisional&hasperpdata=true&searchtype=> accessed 29/01/2019

\*% Of students in a school that attract additional 'Pupil Premium' funding

Table 1: Data summarising characteristics of MATs

Based on these data, 'similar to many other MATs' was taken to mean a MAT that had close to the mean number of schools (5.8), was mixed phase, and whose performance data and characteristics of students were close to national averages.

A final consideration was the ELs themselves. It was important to the study that the EL had experience of enacting the role. EL's experience was a feature in addition to identifying a MAT similar to many others.

## **Data Collection**

Methods were required to collect rich qualitative data, combined with quantitative, network data, about the EL and those involved in enacting leadership practices beyond individual schools.

The approach planned was to start by collecting data about the EL, and then move to a wider group of people within the trust. The first step with the EL would include identifying the wider group. The main method selected for collecting data was different types of interviews.

Other methods that would yield qualitative data, such as observational methods or participant diaries, were not used. Such other methods would provide valuable insights and potentially longitudinal data. There was, however, a practical limit to the resource available in terms of researcher time, and also a limit on access to, and burdens on, the participants. The judgement was that the methods chosen would provide sufficiently valid data to address the questions, by designing appropriate interviews to prompt suitable accounts and to collect network data.

The efficacy and validity of the approach were tested with some pilot work. A small-scale project testing approaches to collecting network data from ELs was followed by a research study, the Institution Focused Study (IFS). The IFS was an exploratory study into executive leadership in a MAT in which data was collected through interviews with ELs and then some other leaders. Evaluation both contributed to narrowing the focus of practices to educational improvement and also to developing the plan for data collection in this study. The specific interview schedules developed for this study were further piloted separately.

The first research question is framed in terms of an EL's intentions and was the rationale for starting the data collection with the EL. The sample for further interviews

will be based on a network identified with the EL. The initial interview will frame and arguably prime the responses of the EL (Smith, Menon & Thompson, 2011). The whole study will therefore be structured by the EL's perception of relationships representing their mobilised network (ibid.). Basing the sample on the EL's selection does not undermine the validity of the data, but it is important to recognise when subsequently analysing and interpreting the data.

The provisional plan was to collect both qualitative and network data in interviews using different types of interview questions. The detail and design for specific elements are elaborated in relevant sections. Some use of documents and websites was also planned, mainly for contextual information.

In summary, the sequence and design of the overall process of data collection were:

- i. Documents and websites where appropriate, for contextual or supporting information, e.g. contextual information about schools, the trust and the area.
- ii. Semi-structured interview with EL.
- iii. Network questions, administered in an interview with the EL.
- iv. Cognitive Interview 'thinking aloud' questions administered alongside network questions.
- v. Individual interviews with a further group of leaders identified in discussion with the EL, using the same structure as the EL interviews.

### **Methods: Interview Design and Semi-Structured Conversations**

The initial interview with the EL was planned as a semi-structured interview about the trust, the EL's understanding of educational improvement and how the EL sought to bring about improvement in the trust. Semi-structured (McCartan & Robson, 2016) and focused interviews (L. Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013) are well established methods of gathering qualitative data. The schedule for the conversation comprises open-ended questions and prompts informed by the research questions. In addition to the questions and prompts, the information shared in advance about the research

would contribute to focusing the interviews (see Appendix 1b for information sheets). The schedule allowed the flexibility to respond and explore ideas and narratives that participants introduced.

The design of the interview started with quite broad, general themes, and then narrowed down to a more specific focus. The planned schedule was in three distinct parts. The broad themes were covered in an introductory section covering personal and organisational history and some general questions about education and improvement. As well as providing individual perceptions of context and stimulating narratives, the section had the intended purpose of getting conversation established and building rapport with the participant. Context, as the leader perceived it, was a key consideration, especially how it was perceived to have changed over time. Context and emergent changes over time are central to the underlying perspective of complexity, and individuals' narratives are an essential part of their response to complexity (Stacey & Griffin, 2006; Weick, 1995 pg. 129).

The next part of the interview was the network questionnaire with questions identifying with whom a leader interacted for particular purposes. The introductory section was also intended to prime the participant cognitively in terms of which relationships were relevant from their large potential network (Smith, Menon & Thompson, 2011). More detail about network questions is dealt with in detail in the next section.

The final part of the interviews returned to the semi-structured approach and more open questions about practices in the organisation, roles individuals played and reasons for choices about what to do. The research questions address specifically the practices of leaders directed at educational improvement and ways of thinking, or frames, that leaders draw on (Weick, 1995 pg. 109) that underly intentions and actions. The full schedule for the EL interview is included in Appendix 2a. The EL interviews were designed so that they could be conducted as two separate

interviews, combining the sections as appropriate, depending on how the conversation developed.

Interviews with further leaders identified in discussion with the EL, were conducted as a single interview, following the same three-part structure as the EL interview. The pilot study showed that securing two interviews with all participants proved very challenging. The single interview was thus planned to ensure as little missing data as possible.

It was proposed to record and subsequently fully transcribe all interviews. The ethical considerations of informed consent of participants are discussed more fully in the ethics section below. The plan was to share information and arrangements for confirming consent in advance, and then discuss and obtain signed consent forms at the start of the interview (example consent forms are included in Appendix 1c).

## **Methods: Network Questionnaire Design**

### ***EL Ego-Network and Network Questions***

The network questionnaire sought the EL's perception of their network of relationships relevant to enacting their role. In Social Network Analysis (SNA) a network is considered to be a collection of actors (nodes) and the connections between them (ties) (Borgatti, M. G. Everett & J. C. Johnson, 2013). Mapping a network so that all of the ties that a particular individual has for some purpose are identified is called an egocentric approach (Carolan, 2013), because the central individual, the ego, defines the network by the people or ties they name. The network is not pre-defined, although in some research the 'potential network' (Smith, Menon and Thompson, op. cit.) may be restricted in some way. The actors connected to the 'ego' are referred to as alters (Carolan, 2013). The combination of the ego, alters and the perceived ties among them constitute an egocentric network (Crossley et al.,

2019). The alternative is a sociocentric approach where a researcher defines the network in advance, and individuals are asked with whom they interact within the predefined network (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010).

This study collected egocentric data from the EL for networks they perceived to be relevant for enacting their role in educational improvement. The resulting network of people provides a boundary for the case, in that the leadership relationships amongst people within the EL's egocentric network, will be the focus of the investigation.

The steps in collecting egocentric data are (Carolan, 2013):

- i. Ask the ego 'name generator' questions: prompts to elicit the names of all the people, or alters, to whom the ego considers themselves to be connected for a particular purpose.
- ii. Ask 'name interpreter' questions: questions to determine attributes, relevant to the research, of the alters named, for example, gender or job role.
- iii. Ask alter to alter questions: asking 'ego' their perception of the ties that exist amongst alters. For each alter in turn, ask to which other alters the ego perceives them to be connected.

A name generator asks the participant to:

list either all or a set number of people with whom they enjoy a particular type of relation. (Crossley et al., 2019 pg. 50)

The first issue to address is the 'particular type of relation'. Mapping not only who interacts with whom, but for what purpose, is an important dimension of enacting leadership.

Network research has explored the importance of informal networks as well as

networks related to the overt, main purpose of an organisation (Krackhardt & Stern, 1988; Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993; Kilduff & Krackhardt, 2009). Networks research in education has explored instrumental and expressive relations (Daly, 2010a). Instrumental refers to interactions that pertain directly to organisation goals, often reflecting organisational hierarchies and associated with more directly cognitive processes, for example, formulating plans for the organisation. Expressive refers to affective social relations, involving more trust, shared values, and support (ibid.) – for example, seeking advice – and are equivalent to informal networks.

The recognition of distinct types of interaction that are relevant to the enactment of leadership was applied to developing the name generators for this study by developing name generator questions to elicit both instrumental and expressive relations. A significant implication is that there will be in effect two distinct networks, instrumental and expressive, albeit potentially with some overlap between the two.

The instrumental name generator question asked about both whom an EL made plans with and with whom they implemented them. Together, the questions identify instrumental interactions because they relate to actions with operational and directly role-related purposes. The expressive name generator question asked with whom the EL had informal discussions about educational improvement or from whom they sought advice about it.

No limit was to be placed on the number of people to be named. There was the potential for there to be overlap between the lists for the two types of relations, but they were not expected to be identical.

Name interpreter questions ask for information about each alter named. The information requested was:

- i. Full name, gender

- ii. Job Title/ Role in relation to MAT
- iii. Employer
- iv. Main organisation with which they are associated in relation to educational improvement activity (if different from iii)

Points (iii) and (iv) would identify people in the egocentric network who were not employed by the MAT, and also people who had a significant role in the MAT, but were not employed by it. An example of the latter would be a trustee, an unpaid, voluntary role, but one with an important function.

Alter to alter connections reveal structure and patterning within the network. For each alter, the EL was to be asked whether they thought that person interacted with, in turn, every other alter for both instrumental and expressive relations. Responses to such questions are brief, but there are potentially a large number of responses required. Collection of alter-alter data is therefore a potential burden on the participant. The burden can be mitigated to some extent by the presentation of the question, but it remains a potential barrier to collecting full data.

### *Cognitive Interview Questions*

An additional type of interview question was developed that enabled the collection of qualitative data about network ties, in response to preliminary studies that showed alter to alter questions prompted discursive responses from participants.

Participants were to be asked to ‘think aloud’ when responding to questions, explaining their thinking behind the choice of ties. Such cognitive interview questions (D. Collins, 2017) have been used to validate survey questions in education (Desimone & Le Floch, 2004) and used to confirm that survey items for social networks were being interpreted as intended (Pitts & Spillane, 2009).

In the context of this study, it was a means both of validating the interpretation of questions, and also understanding the reasons for identifying particular ties selected from a larger potential network (Smith, Menon & Thompson, 2011). This cognitive interviewing technique would thus give qualitative information about the ties being identified.

### ***Identifying the wider sample of participants - The Core Network and Network Questions***

The wider group of people in the trust to be interviewed were to be identified from the EL's egocentric network; precisely who was to be discussed with the EL. The maximum would be all of the people in the EL's egocentric network, in practice, it was likely to be a subset.

The EL's egocentric network was expected to include people from outside the MAT. The intention was to limit the selection of the wider group of participants to those alters whose main educational improvement role was within the MAT, reflecting the focus of the research on the enactment of executive leadership within the MAT.

The precise boundaries of the case would thus, at this stage, be defined in the process of data collection. The specific group of alters to be interviewed, identified from within the EL's egocentric network, will be referred to as the Core Network.

The interviews with the further leaders identified in discussion with the EL, the Core Network, were planned as single interviews, following the same three-part structure as the EL interview (See Appendix 2b for schedule).

### *Cognitive Social Structures*

Using the same network questions as in the EL interview with all the people in the Core Network will mean egocentric networks are collected for each person for both

instrumental and expressive relations. The membership of any one person's egocentric networks may overlap with the EL's, but may also include people who are not in the Core Network and will not necessarily include all other members of the Core Network.

In addition to people in the Core Network who are named in an individual's egocentric network, each participant will also be asked about their perceptions of the ties of the other members of the Core Network who they do not include in their own egocentric network. The perceptions of an individual of all relationships in the Core Network was proposed in the conceptual framework as the configuration of leadership relationships around the EL from that individual's point of view. The resulting network is what Krackhardt (1987) referred to as a Cognitive Social Structure (CSS).

Researching Cognitive Social Structures in pre-defined networks is a well-established approach (Brands, 2013). The novel aspect of the design in this study is that the network will have been defined by the egocentric network of an actor. The design is thus a form of snowballing and, as I have noted, requires all members of the Core Network to be asked about all other members, even those not in their own egocentric network.

### ***Summary of Network Methods***

In summary, the data to be collected from all participants was:

- A list of alters for instrumental relations
- A list of alters for expressive relations
- A list of all the alter to alter ties perceived to exist for instrumental relations
- A list of all the alter to alter ties perceived to exist for expressive relations

In addition to this, data collected from members of the Core Network would include:

- A list of alter to alter ties perceived to exist for instrumental relations amongst Core Network members to whom a participant was not themselves connected
- A list of alter to alter ties perceived to exist for expressive relations amongst Core Network members to whom a participant was not themselves connected

EgoWeb (EgoWeb 2.0, computer software, <http://github.com/qualintitative/egoweb>) was used to present questions to participants and record responses. It has been designed specifically for collecting egocentric network data and permits the construction of steps specific to the design of any research study. Data can be exported in a form suitable for use with packages for analysis, notably UCInet and Netdraw (Borgatti, M. R. Everett & Freeman, 2002).

EL data was to be collected in interviews. The preference was for data to also be collected through interviews for all the other participants, permitting the simultaneous collection of qualitative data and supporting the consistent interpretation of questions. If the Core Network proves too large, however, EgoWeb questionnaires can be administered online, albeit this was not the preferred option.

### 3.4 Ethics

Ethics were kept under constant review during the research, as SNA presents some particular challenges. The study adopted the British Educational Research Association (Association, 2018) guidelines on ethics, including the principles covering consent, transparency, privacy, the right to withdraw, the avoidance of harm and disclosure of data collected. All participants were to be fully informed of the aims of the study, to what use the data would be put, and steps planned to ensure the study complied with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which was relevant at the time. The project was formally reviewed and approved following the UCL IoE

student ethical application.

My professional role presented potential challenges to transparency and privacy in relation to the selection of the case. My previous career and current role as a regionally based DfE official meant it was possible potential participants may know or know of me. This might be perceived as a conflict, or as having professional implications for participants in terms of freedom to decline participation or withdraw at any point.

Steps were taken to ensure that potential case study ELs and MATs were not directly known to me. A case outside my region of work was sought, and initial conversations and consent forms emphasised the confidentiality and anonymity of any participation. Forms were very clear on how, and in what form, any references to and use of data collected would be available. Information about the research emphasised its independence.

Network data presents challenges to privacy in terms of anonymity and confidentiality. Network research invites participants to name specific individuals. Conducting a study within one organisation means pseudonymising data (rather than anonymising), as analysis requires it to be clear when different people refer to the same individual. Sharing of network analysis inevitably raises the possibility of individuals in networks being identified. Additionally, it may be that, even if an individual withdraws and does not wish their data to be used, there may be others in the network who share information about that individual. Between them, these raise the possibility of undermining principles of anonymity, privacy and confidentiality.

Potential for identification beyond the context of the case was minimised by planning to assign pseudonyms at the point of collection and maintaining a 'code log' or key separate from the body of data. This would apply to individuals, organisations and locations. Conducting research within a single organisation, however, means that,

whilst steps may be taken to maintain the confidentiality of participation and anonymity of data, it is not possible to guarantee that others in the organisation will not become aware of an individual's participation. An approach of 'truly informed consent' was planned for, in which all potential risks are proactively highlighted to participants as part of obtaining initial consent. Participants' right to withdraw and for their data not to be used at any stage would be emphasised, and interviews were planned to begin with a discussion, so that consent would be given with a full appreciation of any potential for breaches of confidentiality or anonymity. Any sharing of the research within the organisation beyond general, non-attributable themes would require the consent of all participants. Issues were to be kept under review as the project proceeded.

In relation to the GDPR and its requirements, participants were to give explicit consent to the processing of personal data for one or more specified purposes. Full information about the research, making clear how the data was to be used and processed, with the right to withdraw at any stage, was shared in advance. I used UCL templates and privacy notices as the basis of information sheets and forms, and these are included in Appendix 1c.

### **3.5 Identifying the Case and Collecting Data**

This section describes the implementation of the plans described in section 3.3, beginning with identifying the case study MAT.

#### **Identifying and Introducing the Case**

MATs that fitted the broad criteria established were identified by soliciting suggestions from my contacts and professional networks, by selecting trusts at random from a list of published information about trusts, and by asking for suggestions from trusts who were approached but unable to participate. I emailed Chief Executives of trusts, introducing myself as a postgraduate researcher, and outlining very briefly the

intentions of the research. The text of the emails is included in Appendix 1a. Positive responses to my initial approach were followed up with detailed information, including the information sheet in Appendix 1b, to confirm that the intentions and expectations were understood and accepted.

MATs were emailed in sequence one or two at a time. Only MATs that fitted the criteria were approached, meaning the first firmly positive response was to be the case selected, subject to confirming the accuracy of the data and EL's experience. When George, CEO of Neighbourhood Multi-Academy Trust (NMAT), was approached by email, he indicated interest, and, having reviewed the detailed information, confirmed the willingness of himself and NMAT to participate in the research.

### ***Neighbourhood Multi-Academy Trust***

Neighbourhood Multi-Academy Trust (NMAT) is a group of seven schools with three secondaries and four primaries, thus mixed phase and close to the mean number of schools in a MAT (5.8). The schools are in Largetown in England, population 70-100,000<sup>2</sup>. Figure 2 shows the rough location of NMAT schools in the town. There are approximately a further 25 state-funded primary schools and four secondaries, as well as some independent, fee-paying schools. Largetown is a relatively affluent town in England with, compared to the national averages, higher rates of homeownership and a lower proportion of residents claiming any sort of state benefit.

The characteristics of the schools, the publicly available inspection data and pupils' test outcomes indicate that most of the schools in NMAT are close to national average values on most of the measures, with some variation above and below averages.

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<sup>2</sup> Precise numerical values for characteristics have been assigned to ranges in order to preserve the anonymity of the schools and MAT.

NMAT thus satisfied the requirement of being similar to many other MATs. EL George was an experienced CEO, NMAT being the second MAT in which he had held the role. In NMAT the EL was referred to as the CEO.

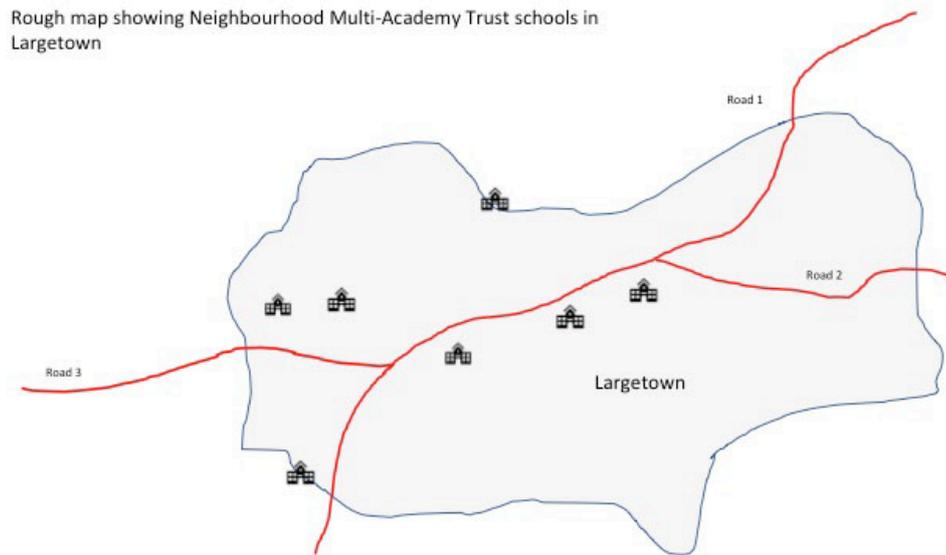


Figure 2: Map showing the location of Neighbourhood Multi-Academy Trust schools

The 3 secondary schools will be referred to by the codes S1, S2 and S3; primaries by the codes S4, S5, S6 and S7. Characteristics of the schools are summarised in Table 2. Ranges of values have been used to preserve the anonymity of the trust.

School	Type	Number of pupils on Roll	Date formally joined Multi-Academy Trust	Pupils eligible for free school meals	Pupils whose first language not English	Pupils with SEN EHC Plan*
S1	Secondary	1800-2000	2013	Below 10%	10 - 15%	1-2%
S2	Secondary	1300-1500	2015	Below 10%	10 - 15%	1-2%
S3	Secondary	300-500	2014	20 - 30%	10 – 15%	4-5%
S4	Primary	600-700	2013	Below 10%	25 - 30%	2-3%
S5	Primary	400-500	2016	20 – 30%	15– 20%	5-6%
S6	Primary	300-400	2016	10 – 20%	5 – 10%	7-8%
S7	Primary	200-250	2014	Below 10%	25– 30%	2-3%
<b>England, state-funded secondary schools</b>				<b>14.1%</b>	<b>16.9%</b>	<b>1.7%</b>
<b>England, state-funded primary schools</b>				<b>15.8%</b>	<b>21.2%</b>	<b>1.6%</b>

\* Special Educational Needs Education, Health and Care Plan; a legal document that sets out an assessment of pupils needs, and the additional support they will receive  
Source of Data: <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk> accessed 22/11/2019. Numerical values have been assigned to ranges to preserve the anonymity of case study schools

Table 2: Characteristics of NMAT schools

S1 and S2 are significantly larger than the average (965) for secondary schools (DfE, 2019), whilst S3 is considerably smaller. S4 and S5 are larger than the average primary school of 282 (ibid.), with S6 and S7 close to the average.

Schools’ pupil populations reflect differences between areas in Largetown. Eligibility for free school meals – a proxy to characterise the relative economic status of schools’ populations – is higher than the national average in S3 and S5, and lower than the national average in S1, S4 and S7, which are all situated on the other side of the town. S4 and S7 have a higher proportion of pupils than the national average whose first language is not English, but it is lower in other schools. Three of the schools have units catering specifically for pupils with special needs. Those schools have higher than average proportions of students with a legal document setting out their needs and required support called an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan.

Judgements following inspections by Ofsted are made public in England, as are aggregated results of pupils in national tests at the end of Key Stages (KS), together with measures of their progress since the previous Key Stage. At the end of Key

Stages pupils are typically aged 11 (KS2), 16 (KS4) and 18 (KS5). Table 3 summarises data for NMAT schools at the time the research was carried out, April to July 2019. The use of colour in the table is that used on the Ofsted and DfE websites ([www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk); <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/> both accessed 22/11/2019).

School	OfSTED Rating	Student Progress (secondary)	Student Progress (Primary) Reading	Student Progress (Primary) Writing	Student Progress (Primary) Maths
S1	Outstanding	Above Average	n/a	n/a	n/a
S2	Good	Average	n/a	n/a	n/a
S3	Good	Average	n/a	n/a	n/a
S4	Good	n/a	Average	Average	Average
S5	Good	n/a	Average	Average	Above Average
S6	Require Improvement	n/a	Average	Well Below Average	Average
S7	Good	n/a	Average	Average	Average

Source of Data: <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk> accessed 22/11/2019. Ratings of school performance on students' progress are in comparison to all schools' performance on these measures and the colour coding for these and OFSTED ratings reflects that used on the published website

Table 3: Ofsted inspection and published test data for NMAT schools

## Collecting Data

I now review the implementation of the plan for data collection outlined in Section 3.3. The full schedules for interviews with the CEO and wider group of participants are in Appendices 2a and 2b.

The interview schedule for the CEO was designed to be flexible. The introductory interview with George lasted approximately one hour and covered the first semi-structured section. The second interview also lasted approximately one hour and asked the structured questions for the network interview and the third planned section of the schedule, a further semi-structured conversation.

In the network section, George listed 28 separate individuals in his instrumental and expressive egocentric networks. The contextual information and the broad introductory questions framed and primed George's responses. The 28 people listed are thus considered to be a 'mobilised network' (Smith, Menon & Thompson, 2011) of people with whom he perceived himself to actively work for the purpose of educational improvement in NMAT.

### ***Choosing Core Network***

The wider group of people to be interviewed, to be referred to as the Core Network, was discussed directly in the second interview with CEO George. He identified a group of 14 people from his egocentric network who were within the trust and whom he regarded as what he called the 'core group':

Those are the people in my head who actually deal with school improvement. They are key people that I relate to in the Trust who are on an operational level improving schools. (CEO, George)

The significance of George's statement forms part of the analysis, it is included here to emphasise that George was selecting from within the full list of 28 people he had named and that he was thinking about the focus of the research and his role. The Core Network was an important element of how George perceived the enactment of the CEO role in NMAT. George's egocentric network did include people from outside the trust. However, the selection of participants was limited, as planned, to alters whose role was within NMAT.

14 was a small enough number to attempt to collect all the data directly by interviewing all selected alters. George told the 14 about the research in an email and that they had been nominated. I followed up by email, specifically inviting them and sharing information. My contact emphasised confidentiality strongly, that no-one else would be told whether or not they were participating and that there would be no separate report back to the trust or George. The right to decline or subsequently withdraw was reinforced.

Interviews were arranged with 10 of the 14 members of the Core Network. Further explanations were not sought from the four people in the core network who declined, and none expressed misgivings. The fact of non-participation did not form part of the analysis, but missing data had an implication for the network analysis and will be discussed with the analysis. Interviews with each of the 10 Core Network participants lasted typically between one and one and a half hours.

Interviews were recorded in full, both the sections of semi-structured conversation and the more closed-style questions of the network questionnaire, thus capturing the 'thinking aloud' responses to the network questionnaire. Recordings were subsequently fully transcribed, forming the basis of the qualitative interview data for analysis.

Table 4 lists the members of the Core Network and their details. Names are pseudonyms. The code generated in the process of gathering data as a unique identifier was needed by the software UCInet (Borgatti, M. R. Everett & Freeman, 2002) used in analysis. The codes appear in some of the visualisations of networks presented in the findings.

Code	Gender	Pseudonym	Role/ Job Title	Principal Organisation	Interviewed
C3	Male	George	Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	Neighbourhood Multi Academy Trust (NMAT)	Yes
C3A1	Male	Harry	Director of Education	NMAT	Yes
C3A2	Female	Ava	Chief Operating Officer	NMAT	No
C3A3	Male	Noah	Director of IT	NMAT	Yes
C3A4	Male	Jack	Trustee/ Chair of Trustees	NMAT	Yes
C3A5	Female	Isla	Trustee/ Chair of Education Ctte	NMAT	Yes
C3A8	Female	Emily	Primary Expert Practitioner	NMAT	Yes
C3A9	Female	Mia	Primary Expert Practitioner	NMAT	No
C3A10	Female	Isabella	Headteacher	Secondary School S1	Yes
C3A11	Female	Sophia	Headteacher	Secondary School S2	Yes
C3A12	Male	Leo	Headteacher	Secondary School S3	No
C3A13	Female	Ella	Headteacher	Primary School S4	No
C3A14	Female	Grace	Headteacher	Primary School S5	Yes
C3A15	Female	Poppy	Headteacher	Primary School S6	Yes
C3A16	Female	Charlotte	Headteacher	Primary School S7	Yes

Table 4: Summary of people named in CEO core network

### **Network Data**

10 instrumental egocentric networks and 10 expressive networks were collected from the interviews with Core Network members. Each of the 10 participants named some people (alters) who were in the Core Network and some who were not. There were overlaps between the additional networks and the Core Network, the rest of CEO George's network, and with each other. A further 58 people (alters of alters) were named who had not previously been named. Fig. 3 summarises the overlapping networks visually.

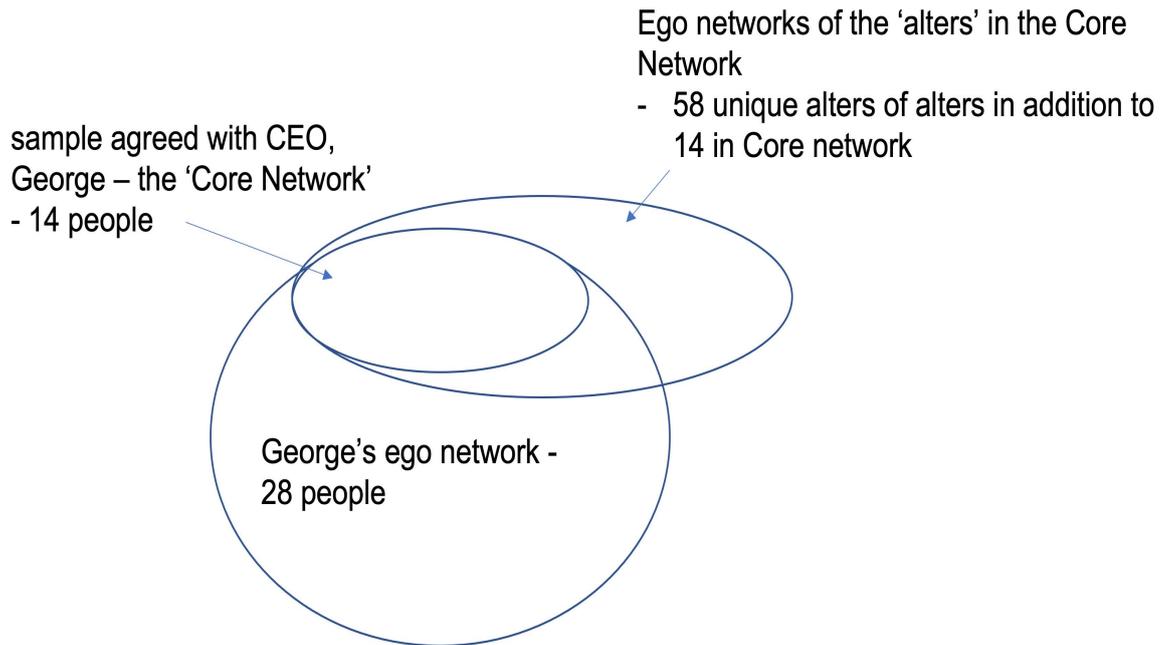


Figure 3: Relationship between networks collected and numbers of alters.

'Snowballing' to 14 of George's contacts, a total of 86 unique individuals were named. The 'name interpreter' questions indicated that between them, in addition to the trust and its seven schools, the 86 people were principally affiliated with 31 organisations. The number of people and multiplicity of organisations highlights the complexity of the network of interactions in which CEO George and the other 14 members of the Core Network are embedded.

#### *Cognitive Social Structure Data*

The relationships between members of the Core Network are the central focus of this study. The design of methods required each participant's perception of the relationships between all the members of the Core Network, that perception being a Cognitive Social Structure (CSS) (Krackhardt, 1987). In all cases, this meant asking participants about the interactions of some additional people they had not named in their personal egocentric network.

Constructing a consensus view of the relationships in the Core Network would ideally

be based on CSS data collected from all 15 members, George plus 14 alters. The data of the four members who did not participate was missing, but there was still information about their interactions from the reports of the other participants. A consensus view of the Core Network could thus still be constructed (Neal, 2008). The treatment is detailed in the analysis.

### **3.6 Planned Approach to Analysis**

Mixing qualitative and network methods as the basic strategy for this study meant the design of SNA methods was influenced by the qualitative approach, and qualitative data would be used to give context, meaning and significance to the network data in the analysis.

The planned approach to analysis was to analyse qualitative and network data separately. Reviewing findings as qualitative, network analyses proceeded, bearing in mind the aims of the study and research focus. Qualitative data from both the semi-structured and cognitive interviews would be related to the mapping of networks, patterns of ties, and analysis of the positions of individuals in the network.

#### **Qualitative Analysis**

The broad approach to thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse the qualitative data, moving through familiarisation with the data, initial coding and then developing and refining themes. Thematic analysis can be applied flexibly and doesn't presuppose any particular theoretical approach (V. Braun & Clarke, 2013 pg. 178).

Initially, the contents of participants' responses were reviewed and codes assigned to chunks of text. Themes developed were broad summaries of the subject or focus of the content. This is in essence what Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to as a semantic,

data reduction exercise. The value of starting this way was to permit a preliminary organisation of the data and ideas followed by more detailed coding and interpretation (Bazeley, 2013, pg. 159).

In the initial stage, codes were attached to quite large chunks of text, working participant by participant. Nvivo software (Nvivo v12, 2020, QSR International) was used at the initial and all subsequent stages of qualitative analysis. Three broad descriptive codes to categorise content were developed deductively, drawing on the sensemaking and leadership theory used to develop the conceptual framework. Further codes were developed inductively based on the specific responses of participants. The deductive codes were Frameworks, Narratives and Practices.

### ***Frameworks***

Frames are important to the concept of sensemaking. Weick describes frames as sets of interrelated, abstract concepts on which people 'draw' to give meaning to and describe experiences (Weick, 1995 pg. 110). Some frames may relate to a policy discourse, for example, 'standards and accountability' (D. K. Cohen & Spillane, 2019; Greany, 2014), and are frequently implied rather than explicitly stated. For example, a discussion of the importance of improving the average performance of a school's students in public examinations is drawing on the idea of 'standards and accountability'. In the complexity perspective adopted, such frames are not fixed, or somehow external, to ongoing communication and relating, but emerge from that process on a large scale.

### ***Narratives***

Narratives involve selecting and sequencing events and experiences, giving them meaning and explanatory power. They are:

examples that imply patterns of belief within which those examples makes sense. (Weick, 1995 pg. 131)

Narratives are also central to sensemaking. The questions in interview schedules acted as prompts for narratives that would include personal, professional and organisational histories.

### ***Practices***

Leadership Practices are activities taking place between people in a particular context with a particular purpose (Spillane, Diamond & Halverson, 2004). In the conceptual framework, leadership practices are seen as emergent, arising from the interaction of plural loci of influence. Schema developed for characterising practices (Camburn, Spillane & Sebastian, 2010; Day & Leithwood, 2007 pg. 192) were a reference point for identifying practices being discussed.

After the initial stage, the broad descriptive themes were reviewed, moving theme by theme rather than participant by participant. Approaching text grouped by descriptive themes framed the type of code assigned. For example, reviewing practices meant approaching the accounts with concepts relating to leadership practices in mind. Segments were thus reviewed based on their apparent meaning and context as opposed to who said it, revealing some differences in perspective between individuals or groups. Codes were assigned to smaller sections of text using an open coding approach.

Within each descriptive theme, codes were then grouped inductively based on meanings and patterns perceived in the data. The formulation of the conceptual framework meant there was nevertheless sensitivity to existing literature, theory and frameworks. Finally, sub-themes, names and groupings were then reviewed, testing for coherence, and checking that text grouped together did have related meanings and, as far as possible, that there were no duplicate or significantly overlapping codes.

Four over-arching categories or ‘organising themes’ (Attride-Stirling, 2001) were developed: Frameworks, Organisational Stories, Leadership Practices and Talking Ties. The first three are essentially the deductive codes used in the initial analysis, ‘Talking Ties’ – a phrase coined by Bellotti (2014) – refers to responses giving insights into the perceived meaning and significance of ties in networks and relationships between participants.

The initial grouping by descriptive themes, followed by open coding of the themes and grouping into sub-themes, and then checking sub-themes for coherence, meant that the whole set of qualitative data was reviewed three times.

## **Network Analysis**

The network analysis was focused primarily on the Core Network, the central focus of this study. The interviews with 11 of the 15 members collected their perceptions of the interactions among all of the members – a Cognitive Social Structure (CSS). The network analysis began by constructing single consensus views of the Core Network for both instrumental and expressive relations, based on the 11 sets of CSS data.

### ***Constructing the Consensus View of the Core Network***

Connections between members of a network can be represented as a matrix, showing who is connected to who. Fig. 4 is an example for the Instrumental connections in the Core Network reported by CEO George; ‘1’ indicates the presence of a tie and ‘0’ the absence. This is called an Adjacency Matrix (Borgatti, M. G. Everett & J. C. Johnson, 2013). The codes C3, C3A1 and so on, refer to individuals as set out in Table 4 in Section 3.5.

	C3	C3A1	C3A10	C3A11	C3A12	C3A13	C3A14	C3A15	C3A16	C3A2	C3A3	C3A4	C3A5	C3A8	C3A9
C3	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
C3A1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
C3A10	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
C3A11	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0
C3A12	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0
C3A13	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1
C3A14	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1
C3A15	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1
C3A16	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
C3A2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
C3A3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1
C3A4	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
C3A5	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
C3A8	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
C3A9	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0

Figure 4: Adjacency Matrix, George, CEO; Instrumental Network

C3 is George’s code. The first row shows George was tied to all 14 alters, the Core Network being part of his egocentric network (‘0’ is assigned on the diagonal so that no-one has a tie to themselves). George’s perception, however, is that C3A9 is tied to only eight of the 14.

Fig. 4 represents George’s perception of instrumental relations in the Core Network. There were 10 other versions, one for each participant. Krackhardt proposed creating ‘Locally Aggregated Structures’ by combining multiple views of a network based on simple rules (Krackhardt, 1987), resulting in a single matrix summarising the ‘consensus view’. The consensus view would be represented by a single matrix like Fig. 4.

A complete set of data would be 15 matrices, and the ‘consensus’ matrix could be created by deciding for each pair of actors, say Harry (code C3A1) and Charlotte (code C3A16), that a tie existed if either of those two people said a tie existed. Krackhardt called this the union rule (*ibid.*), or more strictly, if both people said the tie existed, the intersection rule (*ibid.*).

In this analysis, however, there is missing data, so the approach above could not be used to get the complete network. The approach, again proposed originally by Krackhardt (ibid.), was to take the 11 reports of the network ties of the four members who did not participate, and to count a tie as existing if a certain number, the threshold value, said it did.

The detail of the approach to deciding the threshold value is set out in full in Appendix 3a, following the method proposed by Neal (2008) based on Krackhardt's original work (1987). For the instrumental network, the threshold value determined was 7 for the instrumental network and 4 for the expressive. The difference here reflects the fact that there were many fewer ties reported in the expressive networks.

The application of the threshold value to the 11 matrices in order to derive the consensus view of the full Core Networks with all 15 members was carried out using UCInet software (Borgatti, M. R. Everett & Freeman, 2002). Visualisations were then created using Netdraw, part of the same software package. Subsequent calculation of network measures was also conducted using UCInet.

The consensus views of the instrumental and expressive Core Networks represent a collective or shared perception of the relationships among members in the Core Network. The subsequent analysis focused on the consensus views of Core Networks.

Choices about the focus of the detailed analysis of the Core Networks were shaped by the qualitative analysis, and principally involved exploring the positions of individuals in the networks and the pattern of specific groupings in the networks.

Individuals' personal egocentric networks beyond the Core Network were important as the Core Network was 'nested within' the wider set of interactions. The pattern of

relationships beyond the Core Network is thus used to give some context and meaning to the Core Network, but there was not a detailed analysis of the structure and patterning of the wider set of relationships.

# Chapter 4: Qualitative Analysis and Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative analysis of data gathered principally from interviews with the participants. The findings from network analysis are presented separately in Chapter 5. The characteristics of NMAT were set out in Section 3.5, emphasising that in terms of the features described, NMAT is similar to many other MATs. The conceptual framework also made clear the importance of history and local context.

NMAT was formed in early 2013 from secondary S1 and primary school S4, most of whose pupils transferred to S1 at the end of KS2. Fig. 5 summarises the changes over time as more schools became part of the trust, inspections took place and the Chief Executive post-holder changed.

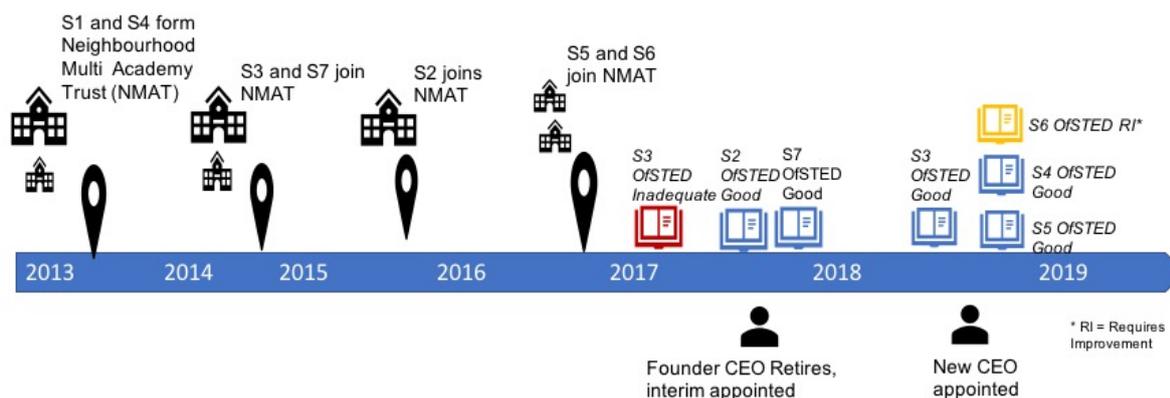


Figure 5: Timeline for NMAT

The current CEO, George, took up his post almost a year after the original, founding CEO retired. A temporary post-holder in the intervening period meant that, in a relatively short period, there had been three different CEOs. Between 2013 and the retirement of the founder CEO, the trust had grown to its current size.

Interviewees' reported all the schools except S3 joined as a result of their governors and headteachers deciding to join the trust. School S3 became part of the trust as a sponsored academy, meaning that it had been regarded as not providing a good

enough education to its pupils; the sponsorship arrangement was required by the Department for Education as a means of improvement.

NMAT has a central team of staff who are not affiliated with individual schools. The executive team comprises the CEO, the Chief Operating Officer and the Director of Education. There are also Directors of Human Resources (HR) and Information Technology (IT). In terms of legal governance, the employed staff of the trust report to a single Board of Trustees, through the CEO. In NMAT, boards of governors have been retained for each school, in many cases retaining at least some of the individuals who were part of the governing body when the school was overseen by the local authority. Local boards are expected to assume responsibilities principally in relation to educational activities in schools and the most appropriate use of resources.

### Organisation of Findings

The analysis in this chapter is set out under three of the organising themes: Frameworks, Narratives and Leadership Practices. The fourth overarching theme, Talking Ties, will be drawn on in the analysis of networks in Chapter 5.

Table 5 summarises the descriptive themes developed in the initial stage and reviewed to infer the final organising themes. Shading indicates the amount of content against that code (darker meaning more coded content) for each participant. The table is not presented as a quantitative analysis but as a visual representation of the rough balance in the interviews spent on different areas and to highlight the variation within and between themes.

The variations suggest paying attention in qualitative and subsequent network analysis, both to the detail of themes developed from descriptive coding, and also to which participants or groups of participants are addressing them.

Nodes	C3	C3A1	C3A10	C3A11	C3A14	C3A15	C3A16	C3A3	C3A4	C3A5	C3A8
Change		6	4		3	4		6			8
Framework	14	9	6		5	4		5	10		8
Leadership Practices	22	12	12		9	11	13	10	10		16
Network Reasons	15		10					6			
Organisation now		8				11					
Organisational History			6					4			
Personal History											
Relationships		5	4								4
Research - Confidentiality											
Research - Questions and Methods											

Table 5: Table of initial coding from semi-structured interviews

## 4.1 Frameworks

The frameworks evident in participants' responses related to Purposes and Values underlying education, Processes relating to education and schools, and Organising, and how people relate and work together.

### Education and Schools: Purposes, Values, Processes

#### *Realising Potential and Equity*

The purpose of schools was frequently expressed in terms of the difference made to students, broadly framed as realising potential, preparation for the future and life chances.

It's got to be more holistic, hasn't it? It's about setting children up ready for the next stage of their journey. (Poppy, Headteacher, Primary S6)

You always think about why you're doing this and you're doing it because you want the kids in our care to get the best experience and to get the best life chances that they can possibly have whilst they're at school. (George, CEO)

Equity was a strong theme. The idea that schools' roles include ensuring that students who may be disadvantaged in some way are able to thrive was strongly held:

For example disadvantage, which is significant focus for us as a trust ... I'd put special educational needs in the middle and our ability to support those vulnerable children. (Isabella, Headteacher, Secondary S1)

I think our priorities in all of the schools is the point of disadvantage. I think it's a clear priority. (Harry, Director of Education)

Articulating goals for students and expressing purpose in ethical terms were common ground for participants.

### ***Importance of Teaching and Use of Evidence***

Some frames related to how goals might be realised. The idea that improving the quality of teaching was central to improvement was pervasive:

At the end of the day school improvement is about high quality teaching. (Sophia, Headteacher S2)

Yes it's important to make sure that the admin staff can do their jobs ... But the whole idea of it has to be that focusing on those students in a classroom makes sure that teachers can teach and students can learn. And that's what it's all about. (Noah, Director of IT)

The principle of being informed by evidence or research was mentioned by several participants:

We're very keen about using up to date research to drive a strategic vision. (Grace, Headteacher, Primary S5)

Jack (Chair of Trustees) in particular has been careful about collecting evidence and has actually usefully looked at educational research. (Isla, Trustee)

### ***Standards and Accountability***

Ideas that can be characterised as referring to standards and accountability were stated or implied by all when discussing educational improvement.

Standards reference students' achievements in public examinations, as well as assessments developed by the schools. This was often expressed quite directly:

(It's) got to be around standards which is going to be outcomes ... the curriculum is only as good as its outcomes really. (Isla, Trustee)

Foremost, it's academic standards, their attainment and progress. (Poppy, Headteacher S6)

Accountability refers to external inspection by Ofsted, publication of schools' data, nationally determined benchmarks for standards, and internal, hierarchical relationships that use the external environment as a reference.

I've got an Education Director and I've got people who go in and visit the schools regularly who report back ... We've had four Ofsted inspections this year ... the good thing for me was that they all got what we expected them to get so we obviously knew our schools well. (George, CEO)

It's also a role of holding to account in terms of performance data, decision making, so that's my interface with the schools, looking downwards as it were. (Harry, Director of Education)

Standards and accountability were an assumed part of the environment. The idea included the hierarchical relationships within NMAT, for example, the relationship between the Director of Education and headteachers, or between trustees and the CEO.

## **Organising: Relationships, Roles and Principles**

### ***Collaborating and Sharing Practice***

Headteachers, trust staff and trustees all spoke in terms of collaboration:

For us it's a lot of peer reviews and working together to think about the way that we approach things in small teams of relevant people in our schools. (Isabella, Headteacher Secondary S1)

But more importantly start to work collaboratively around developing expertise, moderation, assessment which we currently don't have. (Harry, Director of Education)

The value of collaboration, or insisting on collaboration in order to bring about improvement. (Isla, Trustee)

The idea that deepening knowledge and capability can be achieved by staff in

different schools working together was a commonly held assumption. Participants saw collaboration in terms of a joint endeavour, often expressed as partnership.

### ***Hierarchy and Autonomy***

Trust staff and trustees all expressed very clearly an assumption and intention that the trust should influence the way the schools worked together and, in some respects, constrain the extent that some decisions were made autonomously within individual schools:

As a Multi-Academy Trust ... being sovereign ... is losing, ah, missing a massive opportunity ... losing some sovereignty is far better than missing out on the opportunity of being able to share good practice and to be able to do things together. (George, CEO)

People are still very inward looking in the schools rather than, say 'I'm a member of this trust and I'm a Deputy Head' ... in many of our schools, they would say, 'I work at this school'. (Harry, Director of Education)

Basically, we have moved from the old model I would call it, where our schools joined us on condition that they were left well alone ... our understanding of the most effective trusts out there are where you have much more alignment. (Jack, Chair of Trustees)

The frame, NMAT as a single organisation with a clear hierarchy of responsibility and authority over schools, is clearly in evidence.

The central trust staff tended to speak of NMAT as a single organisation.

Headteachers, however, mostly spoke in terms of the trust as an organisation separate from the schools, implying a degree of autonomy. George, Harry and Jack implicitly recognise that sense of autonomy. Harry more explicitly recognises the tension for school staff. Autonomy as a frame is implicit in the accounts of central staff.

### ***Efficiency and Resources***

A final frame relating to organisations was Efficiency and Resources. Participants

consistently referenced allocating resources and managing finances with respect to finite budgets and organisational priorities.

You can't run an organisation of seven schools and five and a half thousand pupils without having the correct processes ... you've got to have the processes and the people in place to keep you safe. (George, CEO)

I now work for Harry who's the Director of Education because I kept banging on about the fact that we should stop spending money or doing work on things that don't help teaching and learning. (Noah, Director of IT)

George refers to managing resources and Noah suggests that decisions are within the control of an autonomous organisation. The matter-of-fact assumption is drawing on the image of the organisation as managing income and expenditure, balancing budgets, and functioning in markets or quasi-markets.

## **Frames: Reflections and Findings**

Frames relating to the purposes and values of education and the processes that underpin them appeared to be understood and used in a similar way by all. Frames that related to ways of organising and relating showed greater tensions.

The frames related to organising, NMAT as a collaborative organisation, and as a single legal, hierarchical organisation, and schools as autonomous organisations, are themes found in the emerging literature on MATs.

Baxter and Floyd (2019) describe MATs as collaborative organisations, using a definition of 'joint activity, between two or more organisations, intended to create public value by working together as well as separately' (ibid. pg. 1054). Greany and Higham (2018), however, argue that MATs are not collaborative partnerships in the sense used by Baxter, referring to their hierarchical legal structure, meaning the trust board determines the role of schools' local governing boards, and controls the finances and resources. They suggest that mergers and acquisitions of companies

are a more relevant reference point. Autonomy and decision-making at a school level are well established as principles and an international phenomenon (Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2008).

The responses of participants showed that collaboration, hierarchy and autonomy are present in thinking and drawn on simultaneously. Headteachers, for example, talked about collaboration with other schools in the trust but positioned the trust as a separate organisation with an awareness of both autonomy and hierarchy.

## 4.2 Narratives

This section draws together themes from participants' narratives under the categories of Identities, Histories and Relationships. The frames set out in the previous section inform accounts of how the trust and schools are seen in the present, and elements of the past seen as significant.

### **Identities: Organisational and Professional**

#### ***Organisational Identity of Schools***

Organisational identity, as that which is core, distinctive and enduring was, in terms of schools, often expressed in terms of the pupils, their families and their circumstances, and what that meant for the school.

We've got to get it right for our vulnerable families ... We've got to get it right for our children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) which is about 30% of our population. (Grace, HT Primary S5)

Being a very inclusive practitioner, I can see great excellence but ... this is a very polarised community. We've got very, very affluent young people here and some very complex, really disadvantaged young people. (Isabella, HT Secondary S1)

Charlotte was also keenly aware of the differences between schools:

S3 and S7 are very similar in their ways of doing things. In their context of pupils ... this side of [Largetown] is considered to be the more affluent ... The other side you've got two other schools that are very, very different contexts. They are over 50% PP (Pupil Premium). (Charlotte, HT Primary S7)

The significance of identities and the way patterns of relationships were perceived did vary between individuals and groups, and this will be developed further in the section below on relationships and subsequently in the network analysis.

### ***Professional Identity of Headteachers***

Headteachers were seen as the strategic leaders of a school and responsible for all aspects of its work. Headteacher identity was significant because as executive leadership roles have become more common this was perceived to have had implications for the role of headteachers:

We are, the three heads of the secondary schools, we are headteachers. We're not 'Heads of School' ... many other trusts you will find ... a CEO or an Executive Head and 'Heads of School'. (Sophia, HT Secondary S2)

The question of how the role was defined related to the heads' view of themselves and their discretion in relation to their school. The role was understood in the same way by the trust staff:

The schools are still working as autonomous organisations led by headteachers who have a traditional headteacher job description. (Harry, Director of Education)

Professional identity related to the heads as individuals but is by definition related to a specific school. All heads also articulated a strong organisational identity.

## **Histories: Organisational and Personal**

### ***Schools' Histories and Joining NMAT***

The seven schools in NMAT became part of the trust at different times, summarised in Fig. 5 in Chapter 4. All headteachers could give an account of how they understood

the history of their school joining even though, with the exception of Grace, none had been staff at the school at the time. The reasons and motivations given for joining NMAT fell into reasons of protection, affinity with NMAT in some way, and personal relationships existing at the time.

#### *Joining: Protection*

Preserving a schools' autonomy in making significant decisions about its future, a discretion perceived potentially to be jeopardised by government policy, was one theme in the reasons for joining:

The reason we went down that route is we had an Ofsted ... we felt very exposed and very isolated. So, we decided that we really needed to join a trust to actually have the support ... have people there to be able to speak up for us. (Grace, Primary S5)

At the time ... there was a lot of discussion about 'well, if we do this then we still have control of it'. (Charlotte, S7 – referring to her previous school)

The rationales suggest that, whilst there was no compulsion, there was an implication of protecting something.

#### *Joining: Organisational affinities*

The rationale for becoming part of NMAT in particular was related to affinities between the school and NMAT in terms of ethos, or having a focus on their local area :

And we chose to join this trust because ... the approach of it and the ethos at the heart of it was most similar to what this school is like. And we felt that we would be able to maintain our ethos. (Sophia, S2)

We liked the fact that it was a local group of schools coming from the philosophy of improving outcomes of all the children across the trust. (Poppy, HT S6)

Such statements are a strong, implicit assertion of identity suggesting beliefs and ways of acting that were characteristic of each school.

#### *Joining: Personal Affinities*

The suggestion of a personal dimension highlighted an affinity based on the

relationship between headteachers of the schools already part of the trust and those considering joining:

Also a lot of this is about personality, as far as I can tell ... my observations of it were very much that it was about the people who were the heads of the schools, and who they felt they could work with. (Sophia, S2)

I think this MAT has moved from a relationship-based MAT, where people got together because of the strength of relationship ... an unspoken sort of, 'we all get on well together therefore we will run the schools'. (Isla, Trustee)

As headteachers changed, and other schools joined the trust, those relationships, based on personal interactions would potentially change, as Isla suggests.

### ***Personal Histories in NMAT***

Individual histories illustrate something of the part personal relationships and interactions played in links between organisations. A feature of the histories already noted was that, apart from Grace, (HT S5), all the heads had taken up their posts after the school joined the trust. In all cases, the new headteacher had previously been either a head or deputy headteacher in a school already in NMAT.

In the majority of cases, vacancies had arisen as a result of the existing head moving to a new position or retiring. In two schools, S5 and S7, the previous heads had left as a result of intervention by the trust central team. Both heads who subsequently took up the posts were experienced deputy headteachers and, in their accounts were asked by Director of Education Harry to act as the headteacher:

So there is a notion of the moving around within NMAT. The head of S7, for example, used to be the Deputy of S4 ... it's this notion of sort of growing capacity from within, is quite a strong model, I think, in order to strengthen all the schools. (Poppy, HT Primary S6)

The movement of staff also extended beyond the headship position, as Isabella described:

So (Named teacher) has worked at this school and at S2. So when I came here as a head, I seconded her across from S2 where she was assistant head, to join me here

as deputy head, to help me (with) change. (Isabella, HT Secondary S1)

In these accounts, there were formal interactions based on roles and more informal interactions, perceiving strengths in someone and negotiating movement; Poppy's deputy head had also come from her previous school, and Isabella seconded someone she considered effective.

## **Relationships**

### ***Relationships in NMAT***

Perceptions of how people worked together varied. Primary headteachers and trust staff perceived primary headteachers as working closely together and secondary headteachers less so:

The schools work quite closely together, particularly the primaries. (Poppy, HT Primary S6)

We've developed a much more cohesive, collegiate way of seeing one another. I think there's still work to do with the secondaries ... What's clear is probably, the primary school heads ... I think they have greater interactions with one another. (Harry, Director of Education)

The secondary headteachers saw things differently:

My perception is that the secondary heads work closely together and support each other, we work with the primary schools because we are in an organisation together, we're very happy to work with them but ... I don't pick up the phone. (Sophia, S2)

One of the most common ways we work together fruitfully, the most active partnerships are between the three secondary heads. (Isabella, S1)

### ***Changing Patterns of Relationships***

A strong theme was changes to relationships in terms of personnel, roles, and the nature of relationships both personal and organisational.

#### *Changing Personnel and Roles*

George was appointed CEO after the founder CEO retired and an interim period, meaning there had been three CEOs in a short period of time.

So there's been three years of very different leadership styles during the period that I've been here as a headteacher. (Isabella, HT Secondary S1)

There was also a perception that the trust, as a separate organisation, was changing. Isabella again, said:

I think partly because of the changes that have happened within the leadership of the NMAT and ... structural development of the NMAT, there's a lot of time and energy has gone into building the infrastructure at the centre. (Isabella, S1)

The 'infrastructure at the centre' she refers to are key operational activities like managing the employment of staff, managing finances and the physical buildings and structures of the schools.

### *Changing Nature of Relationships*

George was aware of what had gone before in terms of the nature of relationships in the trust, and was clear that he was attempting to change them:

What you've got to do is you've got to build trust, you've got to build relationships, you've got to build a new way of working. And so one of the big things has been to get my own team to see that, actually, we can propose things. (George, CEO)

One thing that I changed from day one was we're going to have transparency about everything ... about the budget ... about where the schools are in their improvement journey. We're going to be open with people. (George)

Some headteachers reflected George's initiative in their accounts:

I think this year the trust have been much more transparent with their decisions and sharing things with the head. (Grace, Primary S5)

I suppose the direction of it is clearer ... It feels under George's leadership that there's sort of more strategy, more direction. (Poppy, HT Primary S6)

The interplay between George, the executive team's actions and the perceptions and actions of others is central to the research focus, and was an explicit, acknowledged feature of change.

### *Changing Identities*

Changing relationships also challenged the identities of different constituencies within schools. Heads reported discussing how the school related to the trust with local school boards and staff.

Even though they had agreed to join NMAT ... (they) were very very anti the organisation (NMAT), so I've had to work very hard to show the governors the advantages of working in the organisation. (Poppy, HT Primary S6)

I've had to work quite hard in this school to try to maintain, you know, we're a member of NMAT. (Sophia, HT Secondary S2)

Ambiguities were held in tension by individuals. Governors of S6 questioned the benefits of their previous decision to join the trust, at the same time as participating in practices coordinated by the trust; individual staff in Sophia's school did not always identify with NMAT at the same time as working collaboratively with schools in the trust.

### **Narratives: Reflections and Findings**

The narratives of participants give concrete expression to organisational, professional and personal identities. Headteacher identity and the changing identity of the trust are very salient.

The tension between the autonomy of a school, the idea of the trust as a single organisation with a hierarchy, and the widely shared idea of collaboration was evident in a number of accounts. Director of Education Harry's account acted to change the leadership of two schools, for example. At the same time, Harry's perception of the relationships between primary headteachers and the trust was of a developing 'cohesive, collegiate' approach. Leaders were explicitly aware of the tension and paradox, challenging professional and organisational identities reflected in numerous references to and awareness of change.

The CEO and almost all headteachers had changed since the establishment of the

trust. The persistence of distinct, albeit changing, identities rooted in an awareness of the history and distinctiveness of the schools and the development of the trust was a striking feature of the narratives.

### 4.3 Leadership Practices

Leadership Practices are grouped in this section under the main areas participants described, which were: Vision, Setting Goals and Planning; Leadership for Learning; Culture and People; Governance, Evaluation and Reviewing; Designing, Changing and Managing Organisations; and Spanning and Defining Boundaries.

#### **Vision, Setting Goals and Planning**

Vision, Setting Goals and Planning summarise the way trustees, executive team and headteachers spoke about NMAT, ranging from a very generalised idea of what the trust represented and could achieve, to how it might function as an organisation, to plans for specific activities in schools.

#### ***Vision***

The trustees and executive team spoke in quite general terms about goals and plans for the trust.

Through this MAT, we can make some inroads to bring different bits of the town together ... achieving that vision is so ... energising and so compelling and so exciting about what it can bring about. (Jack, Chair of Trustees)

The idea of 'bringing bits of the town together' referenced differences in wealth and social circumstances. The desire to see NMAT schools working together in more coordinated and consistent ways was a reflection of the idea of 'bringing together'. George saw bringing schools together as a primary focus of his role:

I've been brought in to build relationships, but to bring it into a much more focused Multi-Academy Trust ... looking at a consistent approach to school improvement, a consistent approach to curriculum ... to actually get them into a more cohesive group

of schools. (George, CEO)

The goals articulated by Jack and George were seen as a change by those in schools. George clearly related the change to educational improvement:

I think they've only ever seen being in a trust as a process, a mechanism, rather than a school improvement opportunity.

Creating 'a more cohesive group of schools' pervaded talk in relation to other practices.

### ***Goals and Planning***

Vision, goals and planning as leadership practices, were enacted through a range of activities and tasks.

Trustees spoke in terms of influencing others through messages, meetings and planning:

Getting the message from the trustees, via the CEO, via the school leadership, about the value of collaboration ... in order to bring about improvement. (Isla, Trustee)

That's about making plans. Yesterday for example we had the chairs (of school governing boards) meeting, with the trustees. (Jack, Chair of Trustees)

Heads referred to similar group meetings with the CEO.

Headteachers spoke of being aware of trust priorities that extended beyond the school whilst making plans for their schools. Change in relationships was evident in the activity.

Up until now it's been quite a devolved system of school improvement. So we as leaders in the schools are very much driving how that works ... for the next academic year the trust ... has now developed a school improvement programme ... we haven't had a formal one until now. (Isabella, HT S1)

We work with the trust and we share what our vision is for the following year and then the trust obviously get updates of that improvement throughout the year ... it's just very difficult as a head to make sure you get the balance right between what the trust want to do and making sure it's right for your school, and your context. (Grace,

Primary S5)

Heads' main priority was their school. The trust executive team, whilst clearly thinking about individual schools, were also thinking about the group as a whole. Negotiating boundaries and managing tensions were evident in planning activities.

The central trust and schools interacted in different ways to plan and develop goals. George described a conference for all staff of the trust held in a large venue in the town. The overt focus was the education of disadvantaged students within NMAT. Speakers with a national reputation and expertise gave the event added status. George was also explicit about the multiple significances of the day:

And so there were two real purposes for that day, one was to actually get that message across that we're concentrating on pupil premium ... the other thing was ... for them to look round the room and think 'Blimey, we're quite a big organisation really and we're not tapping that potential'.(George, CEO)

This event was repeatedly referenced by heads in terms of validating their own focus on disadvantaged students and as representing a role of the trust in relation to schools.

Some specific plans were the initiative of the central team:

We're going to be working hand in glove with another trust and actually with the diocese ... on a new school improvement model for our trust and for their trust.  
(George, CEO)

A number of the heads also referred to these plans and discussions, and to plans for regular meetings between staff within schools in the two trusts.

Plans were not presented by the trust team as faits accomplis requiring compliance. Rather, discussions took place through various forums. An example was a discussion about how much to co-ordinate the curriculum and specific syllabuses that were used between secondary schools within NMAT. George saw the plans to work with another trust in the town and the curriculum discussion as concrete expressions of what being

a more cohesive group of schools might mean.

Plans for specific activities were discussed between members of the central team and staff in schools, for example planning for sharing and collecting assessment data for pupils:

We've talked to heads about what we would like, why we would like it and then together they sort of come up with well what do they, do they as a group, believe is needed. (Emily, Primary Expert Practitioner)

Dialogue notwithstanding, the trust's plans necessarily meant individual schools took account of them through headteachers and their local governing boards.

## **Leadership for Learning**

Activities relating directly to teaching, activities in the classroom and pupils' learning have been characterised as Leadership for Learning. Related practices such as defining a school's vision, creating goals, and influencing climate and culture have been categorised as separate practices.

The central trust's involvement in pupils' learning was of a different character to headteachers. Trustees had, for example, initiated a general discussion about the curriculum:

We had the director of teaching and learning from another trust come along and present quite a radical approach to the curriculum ... The trustees were very much involved ... curriculum is absolutely at the heart of what we do as an organisation. It's what we choose to regard as of critical importance. (Jack, Chair of Trustees)

The event was intended to communicate the significance accorded to the curriculum by central staff and trustees. Centrally employed staff's involvement in instructional practice was mostly indirect:

Working with people, or any people who support what happens in the classroom primarily, that's how I perceive it. (Harry, Director of Education)

Some of the ways in which Harry and his team ‘worked with people’ are reflected in the other practices such as training and development of staff.

Headteachers described working directly with teachers and, less directly, through designing the curriculum. Poppy, for example, spoke about her role in directly addressing expectations with teachers and less senior leaders in the school:

Suddenly in I come and I say ... this is what is expected of you now ... so there was a lot of affiliation on my part ... then as we’ve gone through this year it’s ... now we’ve got things in place, now this is what’s expected of you. (Poppy, S6)

Grace linked organisational change and reshaping the curriculum:

What we’re now doing is looking at how our curriculum can better meet the needs of our children ... now that we’ve got a separate nursery and reception. (Grace, Primary S5)

Sophia related curriculum discussions to external changes:

What we’ve done ... since the draft framework (Ofsted Inspection Framework) came out ... is say ‘right, we have this very strong vision statement ... how does that translate into our curriculum?’ (Sophia, Secondary S2)

## **Culture and People**

Activities directed at influencing how people acted with one another, recruiting and developing capabilities of people, and defining people’s roles, were grouped together as the practice of Culture and People.

### **Culture**

George discussed culture in terms of changes in the way the organisation as a whole functioned, and he related this directly to relationships:

My job then has been to build relationships and to change culture and to present a different model of doing things where we have much, much more interdependence on each other, rather than schools being seen as autonomous. (George, CEO)

He referred to persuading, ‘bringing people with me’, presenting ways of doing things

or 'showing', and direct interaction:

The role is a coaching role, it's a way of opening horizons, broadening horizons. It's a role that enables me to be able to show a different way of doing things and to bring people with me and bring the existing people with me. (George, CEO)

The central education team spoke in similar terms:

I think we've spent a lot of time working with headteachers winning hearts and minds and gradually pulling people slowly together. (Harry, Director of Education)

I think, for me, I think it's really important to listen because the headteachers are the people in the frontline really ... I think with any change you have to obviously get the buy-in from the schools. (Emily, Primary Expert Practitioner)

There is an implication in this language of securing the commitment of people to act in a particular way. Headteachers generally spoke in this way in relation to their own role and schools rather than the trust:

The question for me as a leader and for my leadership team is how do we bring the team with us. (Poppy, S6)

### ***People: Developing and Recruiting***

All participants spoke of the importance of recruiting and training staff in connection with improvement. The group of schools in NMAT had a long-standing arrangement to provide a range of courses for teachers and leaders. There was also a formally recognised programme to train and award qualified status to trainee teachers. This activity was directly funded by central government through two programmes, Teaching School status and School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT). George saw the programmes as an important feature of the trust as an organisation:

This is improving people from within and to help people to improve. (George, CEO)

Heads too mentioned this aspect of the organisation and in one or two cases implied that this was a factor in their school becoming part of the trust:

The Multi-Academy Trust when we joined it, they had the Teaching School and they were training on the SCITT programme. (Sofia, S2)

The potential for working as a group of schools in NMAT to make it easier and more

successful for schools to both recruit and offer training to staff was explicit:

Because we're in this group we can give our young people something else and it's not just on a practical level about being able to recruit teachers, but that is a big part of it as well. (Sophia, Secondary S2)

Heads reported that recruitment nevertheless remained difficult

I've been recruiting every single day. (Sophia, S2)

When I arrived a year ago ... seven and a half vacancies the day I walked through the school. (Poppy, Primary S6)

Heads described sometimes working together to deal with situations informally:

We do a lot of work and support each other through things like ... my history teacher is off long-term sick and Isabella sent me (named teacher) to come and help with our history. (Sophia, Secondary S2)

Heads and central staff of the trust played distinct roles. Broadly, heads were focused on their own schools and teachers, whilst central staff ensured there was training available for school staff.

### ***People: Roles and Deployment***

A distinctive feature of people and culture in the trust was determining individuals' roles and where they were working:

We have been able to find really strong teachers and strong leaders in schools and move them to other schools ... we had a problem with ... one of the primary schools ... two of the people from one of the other schools were appointed to run that school. (Jack, Chair of Trustees)

One implication of Jack's remark was that headteachers and trust staff had formed a view of which teachers and leaders in schools were regarded as good or 'strong' practitioners.

My work certainly with the primaries, because they're smaller, you can quickly find out who your good people are and then ask them to help out elsewhere. (Harry, Director of Education)

Heads suggested that moving staff was arrived at by agreement and seen as

supportive. There had also clearly been times, also referred to by Jack, when the formal relationships between school and trust had been the basis on which staff had changed, and was a key part of Harry's role:

We had a significant leadership issue with (a school). So that took up about 90% of my time ... it was then establishing a new leadership structure and a new Leadership Team to take the school onwards, and also work with the governors. (Harry, Director of Education)

The aspects of working with staff described here exemplify the tension and paradox between a cohesive and collegiate approach and the hierarchical action of changing the leaders in schools. Movement of staff may take place through informal negotiation between individual heads and sometimes in the more structured way involving the central trust team described by Harry.

## **Governance, Evaluation and Reviewing**

The idea of accountability, associated references to performance, reviewing, the use of data, and roles related to these ideas have been grouped as the practice of Governance, Evaluation and Reviewing.

Chair of Trustees Jack linked key roles very clearly to accountability and educational improvement:

The main elements to the approach to education improvement. Well, George and Harry hold the heads to account, but they work pretty closely with Local Academy committees (LACs) to help them hold the heads to account. (Jack, Chair of Trustees)

The board is responsible for what happens in the trust and I chair the board, so I end up line-managing the CEO. (Jack, Chair of Trustees)

The phrase 'holding to account' was used widely, both by Jack, central staff and heads who also spoke in those terms in relation to their school staff. The phrase carried the idea of an individual or group being responsible for something that happened or for the results of an organisation's actions.

In parallel to this arrangement with trustees and local committees, Harry described his role in relation to the schools:

The main elements would be through regular meetings with headteachers, reviewing progress, discussing priority issues on their agenda and on ours. It's also a role of holding to account in terms of performance data, decision making, so that's my interface with the schools, looking downwards as it were. (Harry, Director of Education)

Essential to the idea of holding to account in Harry's description is performance data, firmly referencing again the centrality of education standards understood in terms of how well pupils do in tests and assessments.

Inspections and published school performance data based on the results of exams and tests were a reference point for everyone in discussions of accountability. The use of performance data and other information was nuanced, however:

I've introduced a lot more data and so shared data, so they look at each other's educational performance much more closely than they did before I got here ... I've insisted that that is part and parcel of being in a Multi-Academy Trust, that we share each other's data. (George, CEO)

This can be understood as George suggesting that the practice of sharing data was a way of introducing a sharing of judgements by developing a collective assessment of performance and dissipating to some extent the hierarchical sense of judgements within the trust. Harry too emphasised the perceived importance of developing a better understanding of what was happening within schools and for the understanding to be shared:

One thing I think we've done very well over the last two years, or certainly since I've been in post, is developing much greater intelligence about the strengths of our school within the schools. (Harry, Director of Education – my emphasis)

## **Designing, Changing and Managing**

Activities related to changing patterns of organisation in the trust and schools were grouped together as Designing and Changing.

### ***Central Trust: Creating a New Organisation***

Changes in the trust central organisation can be seen as a new organisation being established. For example, Noah, Director of IT, described staff involved in the management of Information Technology (IT), equipment and resources moving into a central team, as opposed to schools each having a dedicated team.

What we're moving to is where headteachers will ... be focused on teaching and learning eventually ... finance, IT ... will be run by the central team. (Noah, Director of IT)

There had been quite significant changes to the trust in the past as it grew to a group of seven schools. There was one reference to further changes:

It is being floated amongst the heads we need to expand the trust ... closer alignment with, with a view to amalgamation (with another trust). (Isla, Trustee)

The idea had been introduced by the central team of George and Harry. There was not an immediate prospect of amalgamation occurring, the point is such changes amount to reconstituting and creating new organisational patterns between schools. Isla and Noah were both connecting creation of new organisations to educational improvement, either directly or indirectly, by removing the need for school staff to concentrate on 'other functions'.

### ***Headteachers: Changing an Organisation in NMAT***

Where schools were changing their organisation, changes were made within existing boundaries and without fundamentally reshaping them. The relationship with the central trust was important, nevertheless. A reorganisation at S5 involved changing the number of classes and how young children were grouped together, a reorganisation in a school with an overtly educational intention, but which had administrative implications:

So, Ava (Chief Operating Officer), we obviously need her support to look at the financial picture and how we can make it work ... (the) HR Director, we need to get her involved to help us with the whole process of restructuring for staffing ... the whole aim is to improve education outcomes but we have to obviously involve the

central team in things that you wouldn't think are part of it. (Grace, HT S5)

## **Spanning and Defining Boundaries**

A distinct leadership practice noted in participants' accounts involved being conscious of boundaries, defining them, and engaging in activities that span them. It is a practice largely expressed in the enactment of other practices.

Boundary spanning is particularly relevant to Changing and Designing Organisations. Noah's account of providing IT services centrally redefined boundaries between schools and the central trust. Similarly, the trust working in partnership with or amalgamating with another trust would involve negotiating boundaries or significant reconstituting and defining of boundaries. Creating or reconstituting organisations inevitably involves reconstituting boundaries.

Practices that involved headteachers and trust staff working together also involved boundary spanning, for example, negotiating the movement of staff between schools. The way that boundary defining and spanning activities were described suggested that the heads may perceive the boundaries, and constitute the groups slightly differently to central trust staff, albeit whilst describing the same activities. Specifically, for example, the idea of a boundary between the school and the trust was stronger in the minds of heads than trust staff, who tended to see the group of schools and the trust together as the bounded group. Perceptions of boundaries and identities can be expected to be reflected in perceptions of the patterns of relationships reported by participants.

## **Leadership Practices: Reflections and Findings**

There was sensitivity to existing theory and literature as the leadership practices described were grouped, even though the grouping was based on participants' responses. Much of what was said about practices is reflected in the literature on

school improvement. It was noted in Chapter 2 the literature relates primarily to individual schools, most commonly the actions of principals and headteachers **and** with sharply defined conceptions of improvement.

Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, on the basis of a wide ranging review, assert:

Almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices. (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2019 pg. 7)

The practices they identify are setting direction, building relationships and developing people, developing the organisation, and improving the instructional programme. Greany proposed a largely similar framework based on an empirical investigation of practices in groups of schools including MATs: vision values, strategy and culture, people learning and capacity, assessment and pedagogy, quality assurance and accountability, and developing a learning organisation (Greany, 2018). Arguably the last two categories extend Leithwood's repertoire.

The reviews highlight the broad categories, widely used in the literature, to characterise leadership practice aimed at improvement. Participants in this study drew mainly on a similar repertoire of practices. 'Leadership for Learning' was used rather than 'instructional leadership' to reflect the conceptualisation of leadership, with a wider range of leadership sources than the headteacher (Hallinger, 2011). Differences between some groups of participants, noted in the expression and focus of some practices and emphases, were a feature of NMAT's particular context. Nevertheless, the perceptions of participants were that the leadership practices enacted beyond schools were drawing on a repertoire of practices also found in efforts to improve individual schools.

The practices were being enacted in the novel context of a MAT and there were distinctive features evident as a consequence. Activities categorised as 'Designing and Changing Organisations' suggested NMAT as an organisation, and relationships between individual schools as institutions, were being reconstituted. Reconstituting

and remaking are particularly evident when another school becomes part of the trust, but it was taking place even without such a change. The practice described is arguably distinct from that conceived in existing frameworks such as that cited earlier, proposed by Leithwood (*ibid.*), that refer to redesigning organisations.

Reconstituting organisations involves both redefining boundaries and challenging organisational and professional identities. Boundaries are thus fluid, contingent and emerging from the actions and activities of many leaders. The notion of boundary spanning found in other taxonomies of leadership practices (Camburn, Spillane & Sebastian, 2010) is extended here to defining where boundaries are, a process negotiated between the interacting groups of leaders.

The leadership practices for improvement are thus being enacted in the context of reconstituting the organisation, NMAT, and negotiating and redefining relationships and boundaries. Familiar practices for all those engaged in executive leadership – in this study the Core Network – are enacted in a novel, emergent context.

The analysis to follow of the patterns of relationships between groups of staff, as well as the positions of individuals in networks, will offer further insights into how leadership practices are enacted beyond schools. The interplay of ideas about collaboration, hierarchy and autonomy, noted in the section on Narratives is evident in accounts of the enactment of practices. Seeing the patterning of relationships will illuminate the interplay further.

## **4.4 Qualitative Analysis: Summary of Findings**

### Frames and Practices and Narratives

The qualitative analysis has shown that there were frames for thinking on which participants drew, summarised in Table 6, that were expressed and understood by

participants in similar ways and were very influential.

Frames
<u>Frames commonly understood</u>
Standards and accountability
Realising potential, Preparation for the future and life chances
Equity
Use of evidence and research
Centrality of teaching and pedagogy
External reference points and review
Efficiency and Resources
<u>Frames held in tension</u>
NMAT as a collaborative organisation
NMAT as a single legal hierarchical organisation
Headteachers and individual schools as autonomous with a high degree of discretion over decisions

Table 6: Summary of Frames

Ideas about hierarchy, the autonomy of headteachers and schools and collaboration between leaders and schools have been consistently recurring themes in the analysis and discussion. Hierarchy has been used to suggest positions and roles implying authority; collaboration has been used to suggest relationships based on joint purpose and shared goals achieved through discussion and consensus, without

positional authority; autonomy suggests individual agency, whether of a person or institution, and the scope to act without reference to constraining relationships.

Leadership Practices described fell into six broad domains, summarised in Table 7 and are a familiar repertoire of practices for improving individual schools and leading organisations.

Practices
<u>Vision, Setting Goals, Planning</u> Trustees and executive, broad goals - communicated through meetings, symbolic events and plans Headteachers – plans for schools, discussions with trust
<u>Leadership for Learning</u> Heads directly influencing what teachers do; curriculum, setting expectations, assessment and moderation, addressing pupil behaviour and attitudes. Secondary/Primary different emphasis; Trustees/Central Staff – indirect influence
<u>People and Culture</u> Trust staff – culture. Securing commitment, building relationships and trust by showing, coaching, listening People – recruiting and developing: common purpose, differentiated roles People – Trust directing resource. Acting and supporting
<u>Governance, Evaluation, Reviewing</u> Formal Roles External reference points; understanding contexts, sharing data, transparency
<u>Changing, Designing, Managing</u> Creating new structures in Trust; internal school changes and inter-dependence with Trust structures; future changes to Trust: distinctive feature ‘re-constituting

organisation'

Boundary Spanning, Defining

Real and subjective, flexible: heads see boundaries around schools, around staff networks – Trust staff see boundaries with other trusts; distinctive feature 'defining boundaries as well as spanning' – reflected in patterns of relationships.

Table 7: Summary of Practices

The analysis of narratives, summarised in Table 8, made clear the importance of the history of each school as well as the headteachers' own histories, with the school's local context and unique characteristics influencing the specific enactment of particular practices. The narratives highlighted the significance of organisational, professional and personal identities. The persistence of organisational identity over time was evident even as leaders changed. These features help understanding of differences in the enactment of practices.

**Narratives**

Professional Identities of Heads

Organisational Identities of Schools

Histories: Schools joining NMAT for protection, affinity, existing relationships

Personal histories, leaders and staff moving between schools

Relationships: Primaries work together, Secondaries work together

Change – To People and Roles in the Trust

Change – Future relationships, a response to executive actions

Change – Less Autonomy more Collaboration, challenging identities

Table 8: Summary of Narratives

The analysis of practices shows a continuing process of reconstituting and recreating

the relationships between schools and the trust occurring. George and the central team may have initiated activities, but the results were emergent. Reconstituting NMAT challenged identities, involving redefining and negotiating boundaries as well as working across them. The practices of reconstituting an organisation and redefining boundaries I suggest are distinctive features of leadership beyond individual schools and mean that even while the leaders draw on a repertoire of familiar practices, the practices themselves may be reshaped and redefined as they are enacted collectively in new and changing circumstances.

# Chapter 5: Network Analysis and Findings

This chapter presents the analysis of network data and key findings in relation to the specific patterns of leadership relationships perceived by participants, through which the leadership practices described in Chapter 4 were enacted.

Analysis is focused on members of the Core Network, George and the 14 alters identified. The first section of the chapter presents the consensus views of the Core Networks. The Core Networks' relationship to all interactions of participants identified is shown, and data giving insight into participants' selection of ties is presented.

The next section presents the analysis of actors' positions in the Core Network, a more detailed analysis of structures apparent in the networks, and a comparison of different individuals' perceptions of the patterns of relationships.

## 5.1 The Networks and Reasons for Selections

### **Core Network**

Figures 6 and 7 show the visualisations of the consensus view of the Core Network for instrumental and expressive relations respectively. Section 3.6 outlined the approach to inferring the consensus views. Instrumental relations involve interactions that pertain directly to realising organisation goals, and expressive relations to affective, social relations involving more trust, shared values, and support.

Fig. 6 shows the consensus view of the network of instrumental relationships. The key is indicated below. The size of the symbol for an individual is larger the more ties they have in the network.

#### Key

Red: People affiliated with the central organisation in NMAT

Blue: People affiliated with a school in NMAT

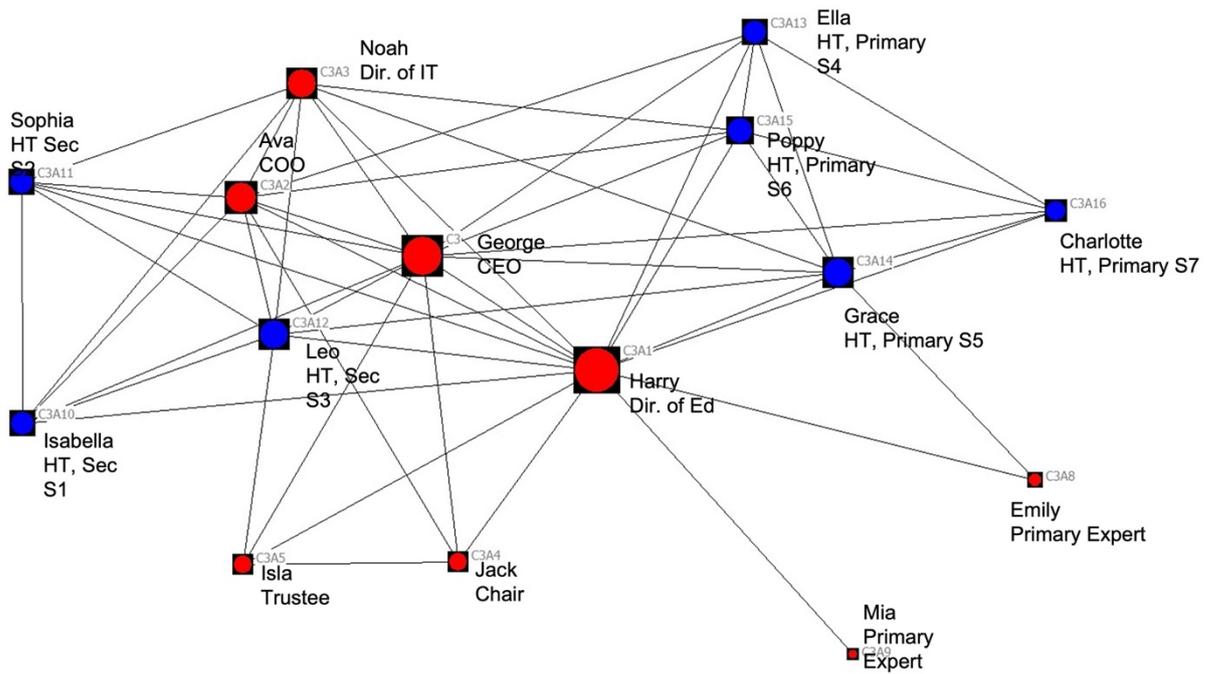


Figure 6: Consensus view of Core Network: Instrumental Relations

The visualisation shows George and Director of Education Harry are connected to more of the network members than anyone else – they are very central. Secondary and primary headteachers are clustered separately, with central staff between them. Interactions are not shown between the two groups of headteachers.

Fig. 7 shows the consensus view of expressive relationships. The meaning of symbols is the same as for Fig. 6, and their size is related to the number of connections.

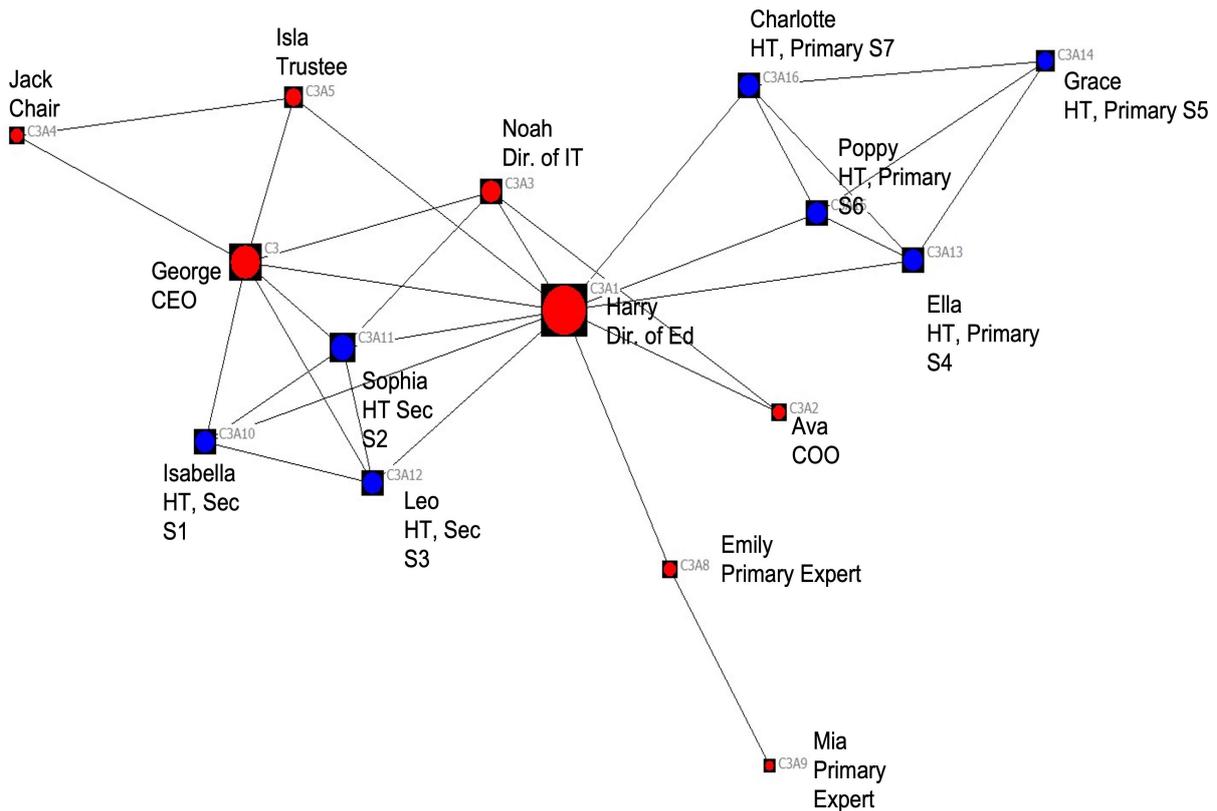


Figure 7: Consensus view of Core Network: Expressive Relations

Some similarities with the instrumental network are apparent. Primary and Secondary headteachers are clustered separately, and Harry and George are again connected to more of the network than anyone else. The network is less densely connected and Harry is more connected in this network than George.

The visualisations provisionally highlight some features of the patterns of relations in the Core Network: the centrality of George and Director of Education Harry; the perception of three distinct clusters of people, the primary and secondary heads and the central Trust group; and differences between the consensus views of instrumental and expressive relations.

## Context of Core Network and all Relationships

CEO George's perception defined the boundaries of the Core Network. It was nested,

however, within a complex array of interactions. Figures 8 and 9 visualise that context, showing all the relationships reported by participants in their egocentric networks for the instrumental and expressive relations respectively. The networks were constructed by aggregating all the alters and ties reported; a tie between two people is shown if anyone reported it.

Fig. 8 is the visualisation of the aggregated network of all instrumental relations.

Key

Red Circles: People affiliated with central organisation in NMAT

Blue Circles: People affiliated with a school in NMAT

Yellow Circles: People affiliated with organisations outside NMAT

Square around circle: Indicates a member of the Core Network.

People shown unattached were named by a participant, but not for the instrumental relationship.

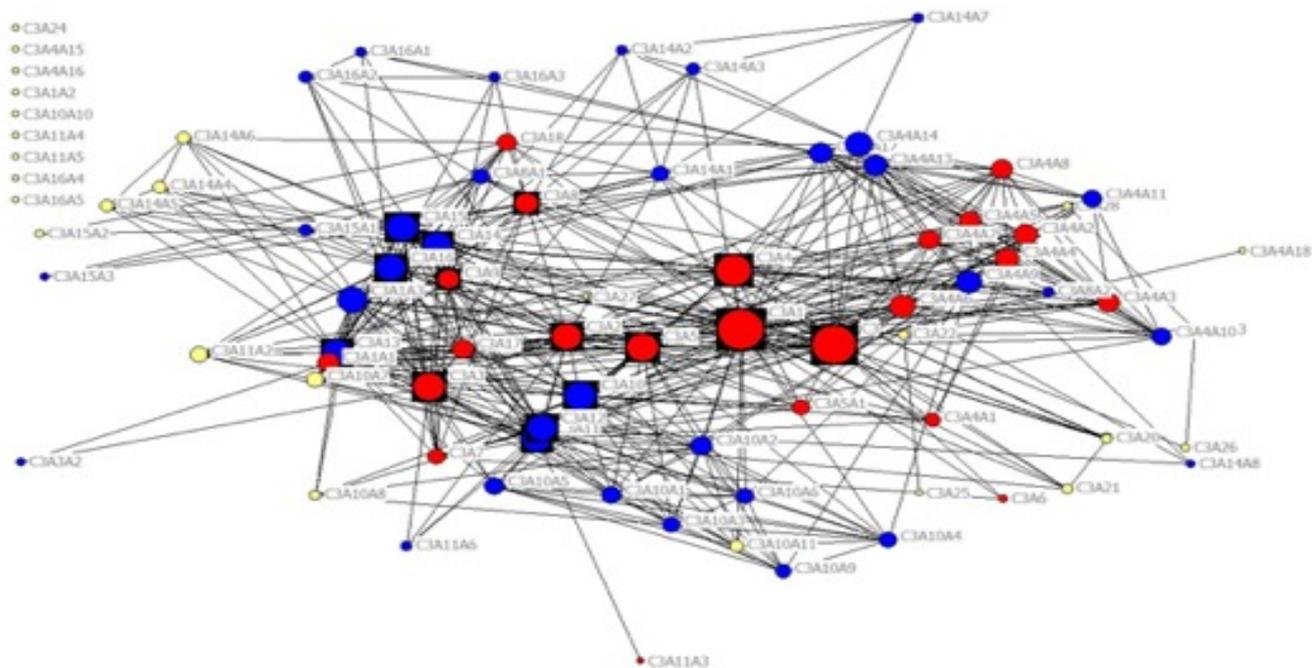


Figure 8: Instrumental Network showing all alters named

Fig. 9 shows the visualisation of the aggregated expressive network. The symbols and colour coding are the same as for Fig. 8.

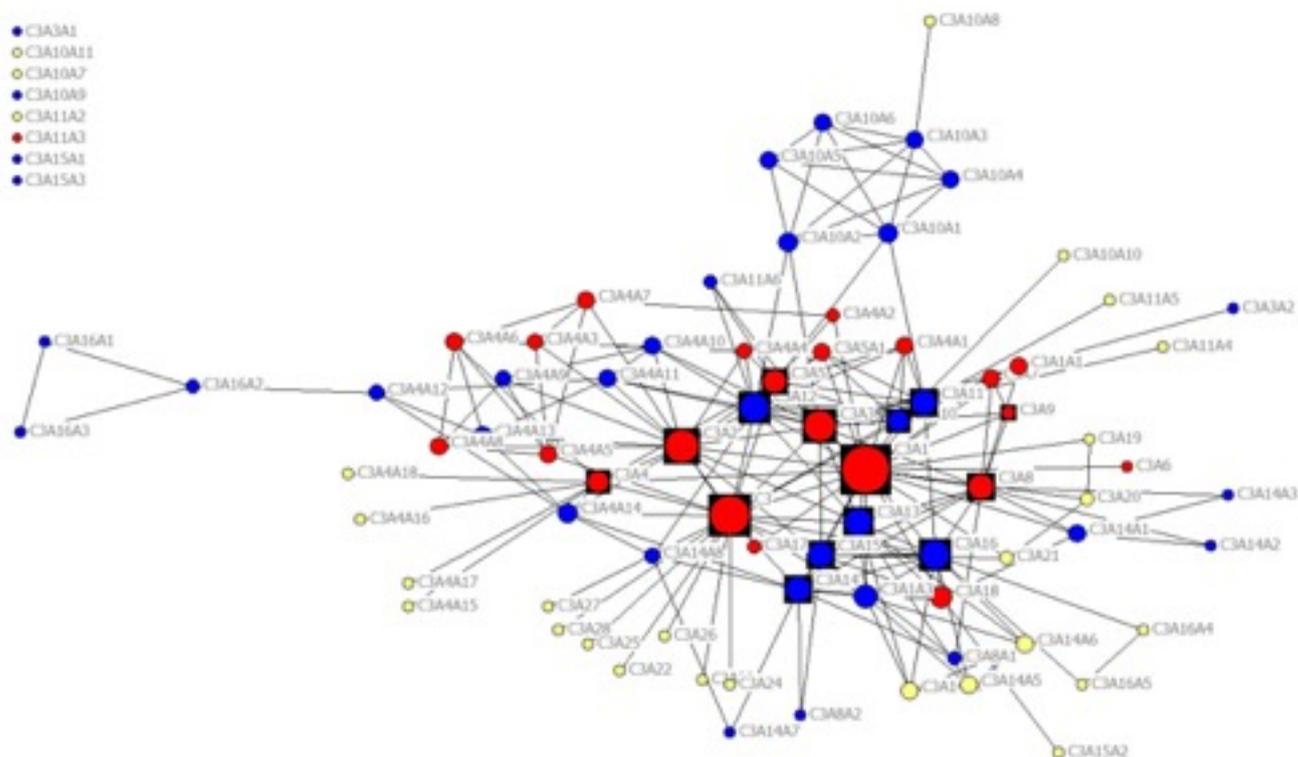


Figure 9: Expressive Network showing all alters named

The aggregated networks show the network of ties extending throughout all the schools and the central trust, highlighting the direct and indirect interconnections between parts of NMAT, and the potential flows of influences and information.

The pattern of ties in the expressive network is less dense and membership appears to include more people who are affiliated with organisations outside NMAT than instrumental networks. More generally, the context emphasises the complexity, from the perspective of any individual, in which enactment of executive leadership takes place. A detailed analysis of these wider networks was not undertaken, however, as the focus of the research was on the Core Network.

It was nevertheless important to have an insight into the reasons participants perceived alters to be part of their networks. 'Talking Ties' (Bellotti, 2014) refers to the responses of participants that give such insights.

## **Talking Ties**

### ***Instrumental Networks: Reasons for Selection***

Those are the people in my head who actually deal with school improvement. They are key people that I relate to in the trust who are on an operational level improving schools. (George, CEO)

George's reference to 'key people', explaining his selections for the Core Network, indicates he chose those he regarded as most significant in terms of educational improvement. The reference to 'operational level' suggests instrumental interactions.

Significance was evident in others' rationales alongside consideration of the amount of interaction.

But thinking about the other primary heads, I probably have less to do with them. (Isabella, HT S1)

Having 'less to do with them' was a reason not to include people. The dual consideration of the importance and frequency of particular interactions was a common reflection.

The instrumental ties Core Network members reported thus represented those that participants perceived to be the 'key', most significant and most frequent interactions in relation to educational improvement. The patterns and structural features in the consensus view of the instrumental Core Network are those recognised collectively by its members as most significant and frequent.

### ***Expressive Networks: Reasons for Selection***

Expressive relations were selected for quite different reasons compared to instrumental relations. The name generator asked about informal conversations, involving exchanges of ideas and advice. Alters named were often people whose knowledge, experience and wisdom participants valued. Over half of the participants used the phrase 'go-to person'. Alters were frequently long-standing professional connections, and described in ways that suggested a strong, trusting relationship:

He's a quite close friend. And again, he's the kind of person I phone up if I've got a real issue that I think 'Oh, who will know about this?' (George, CEO)

My personal relationship with her allows me to have slightly different discussions. (Harry, Director of Education)

Other significant considerations were also articulated or implied. Some participants named spouses or family members who were not directly involved in education, but whose relevant professional knowledge was mentioned, for example in human resources, finance, or creative marketing.

Whether or not alters were part of NMAT was sometimes a consideration. Isabella was explicit:

It's quite important to me ... (to) talk to people outside of this organisation away from here that are completely independent in a sort of coaching capacity. (Isabella, S1)

Close, trusted, accessible and independent alters thus tended to be people who were outside the Core Network and often outside the organisation. Direct professional experience and knowledge were important in such selections, but were sometimes outweighed by affective aspects of interactions.

Participants were also influenced by potential alters' roles in NMAT in terms of what may be said. Reflecting on her perception of one such interaction, Sophia said:

I think she probably would ask George for advice and opinions but I don't think George would ask her, because it would be too difficult because of their professional relationship even if they were good friends. I think she trusts George. (Sophia, S2)

In summary, expressive ties were generally long-standing professional relationships or strong personal relationships. Where there were working relationships, account was taken of institutional roles in NMAT which, to an extent, mediated interactions.

### ***Talking Ties: Reflections***

Participants were making selections when naming people in their networks. Networks do not, therefore, represent all Core Network members' interactions, but those that they were prompted to select by questions about educational improvement. The selections represent mobilised networks (Smith, Menon & Thompson, 2011). In the instrumental network, participants selected those whose interactions they regarded as most significant and frequent. A different blend of considerations contributed to the selection of expressive interactions.

Small (2017 pg. 66), reviewing motivations for seeking advice and support, distinguishes between relationships that are mediated in some way by institutions and those that are not, and additionally those in which there is an expectation of reciprocation and those in which there is not. For expressive interactions in NMAT, some interactions were sought that were unmediated by institutional roles or in which there was greater potential for reciprocation. There are important, influential interactions in expressive networks that are outside the Core Network and NMAT.

More generally, the qualitative data reviewed develops the picture of leadership interactions with different characteristics in the instrumental and expressive networks.

## **5.2 Analysis of Positions and Structures**

### **Positions and Context in the Core Networks**

This section analyses the positions of individuals relative to others in the networks and then contextualises the Core Network more precisely within the wider networks

within which it is embedded.

The visualisations in Figures 6 and 7 suggest CEO George and Director of Education Harry occupy very central positions in the networks. Individuals' centrality can be quantified by calculating network measures of degree and betweenness centrality (Borgatti, M. G. Everett & J. C. Johnson, 2013).

Degree centrality is the number of ties to others a person has in a network (Freeman, 1979). The 'intuitive base' (ibid.) for degree centrality is that it quantifies an actor's direct interaction with others in the network. Betweenness centrality refers to how often someone is on the shortest path in a network between otherwise unconnected pairs of people or dyads (ibid.). Someone for whom betweenness is a high value potentially plays an important role in networks, coordinating and potentially mediating communication with unconnected people. Table 9 shows the values for the degree centrality for each network.

	Degree – Instrumental	Degree – Expressive
George (CEO)	12	7
Harry (Dir of Ed)	12	11
Isabella (HT, S1)	5	4
Sophia (HT, S2)	6	5
Leo (HT, S3)	6	4
Ella (HT, S4)	5	4
Grace (HT, S5)	5	3
Poppy (HT, S6)	5	4
Charlotte (HT, S7)	5	4

Ava (COO)	6	2
Noah (Hd of IT)	5	5
Jack (Chair)	4	2
Isla (Trustee)	3	4
Emily (Pri Expert)	2	2
Mia (Pri Expert)	1	1

Table 9: Degree Centrality, Consensus view of Core Networks

George and Harry occupy central positions in a way that no one else does. The consensus perception is that George, although he identified the network from his egocentric network, does not interact with quite everyone in the instrumental network and Harry is equally central, but Harry is more central than George in the expressive network. In general, the other people in the network interacted with just under half of the group with some central staff notably less.

Table 10 shows the values for betweenness centrality. Absolute values of betweenness depend on the size of the network and the number of ties that exist. The relative values of centrality are important here.

	Between - Instrumental	Between - Expressive
George	20.4	9
Harry	27.5	50
Isabella	0.3	0
Sophia	0.5	0.7
Leo	0.5	0
Ella	0	3.3

Grace	0	0
Poppy	0	3.3
Charlotte	0	3.3
Ava	1.5	0
Noah	0.3	2.3
Jack	0.8	0
Isla	0	4
Emily	0	0
Mia	0	0

Table 10: Betweenness Centrality, Consensus view of Core Networks

Only Harry and George have a significant degree of betweenness, with Harry slightly higher in the instrumental network and much higher in the expressive.

George and Harry's very central positions in both networks reflect their formal positions in the organisational hierarchy of NMAT. The similarity of their positions in the networks suggests their role together as a 'dyad' is important. No one other than George and Harry has significant betweenness centrality, suggesting groupings within the network with relatively little interaction directly between them. George and Harry potentially play some sort of mediating role between groups based on this analysis. Groupings, or sub-groups, are structural features in the leadership relations to be explored further.

For each individual, their whole egocentric network is the perspective from which they perceive their role and through which it is enacted. The extent of overlap between individuals' egocentric networks and the Core Network was thus a helpful contextual point.

Table 11 shows the number of alters in each participant’s instrumental and expressive egocentric network and how many of those were in the Core Network.

	<b>Instrumental Alters Named</b>	<b>Instrumental Alters in CEO-net</b>		<b>Expressive Alters Named</b>	<b>Expressive in CEO-net</b>
<b>George (CEO)</b>	21	14		8	1
<b>Harry (Dir of Ed)</b>	15	12		3	2
<b>Noah (Hd of IT)</b>	14	10		4	4
<b>Jack (Chair)</b>	17	3		4	0
<b>Isla (Trustee)</b>	14	11		6	6
<b>Emily (Pri Expert)</b>	8	5		2	1
<b>Isabella (HT, S1)</b>	20	7		2	1
<b>Sophia (HT, S2)</b>	19	9		5	3
<b>Grace (HT, S5)</b>	14	6		3	0
<b>Poppy (HT, S6)</b>	10	3		4	1
<b>Charlotte (HT, S7)</b>	9	4		4	1

Table 11: Overlap between Ego networks and Core Network

For the instrumental network, participants’ egocentric networks ranged from 8 to 21 in size and most named less than half of the Core Network, on average between 7 and 8. Expressive egocentric networks are generally smaller, ranging from 4 to 8, and participants named very few individuals from the Core Network in their expressive networks, on average 1 or 2. Overlap is greater for the instrumental compared to the expressive network.

Table 12 shows the extent to which an individual’s view of their connections in the Core Network differs from the consensus view. This is indicated by showing the

difference between their degree centrality in the consensus view, and the number of alters they actually named in the Core Network. Thus in Table 12, the difference for George in the instrumental network is '-2', because the consensus view is that George had 12 connections (noted in Table 9) and George reported 14.

Node	Instrumental Degree	Difference consensus cf named		Expressive Degree	Difference consensus cf named
George (CEO)	12	-2		7	6
Harry (Dir of Ed)	12	0		11	9
Noah (Hd of IT)	5	-5		5	1
Jack (Chair)	4	1		2	2
Isla (Trustee)	3	-3		4	-2
Emily (Pri Expert)	1	-4		1	0
Isabella (HT, S1)	5	-2		4	3
Sophia (HT, S2)	6	-3		5	2
Grace (HT, S5)	5	-1		4	4
Poppy (HT, S6)	5	2		3	2
Charlotte (HT, S7)	5	1		4	3

Table 12: Comparison of Consensus with Ego network for Core Network

Individuals perceive the patterns of leadership relationships differently from each other and differently for themselves compared to the consensus view. Individuals generally see themselves as more connected than others see them in the instrumental network, and less connected than others see them in the expressive network.

### **Positions and Context: Reflections**

George and Harry share a very central position in the Core Network, both in terms of direct interactions and acting between sub-groups, which does suggest relationships

based on hierarchical position. The analysis of centrality also reinforced the existence of structure and sub-groups within which there will be interactions. Analysing sub-groups in greater depth offers the scope to deepen the understanding of how the interplay of ideas of collaboration, hierarchy and autonomy is expressed in interactions and practices.

Comparing the Core Network to individuals' egocentric networks highlighted the limited overlap of expressive egocentric networks and the Core Network. The assumption is that those expressive interactions that do take place in the Core Network are important for shaping behaviour, enactment of practices, and ideas about the organisation. In the section on Culture in the qualitative analysis, for example, George speaks of building relationships and bringing people with him, whilst Harry speaks of winning hearts and minds, intentions arguably pursued through expressive interaction.

The comparison of Core and egocentric networks also illustrated how differently individuals perceive the patterns in the Core Network. Exploring such differences in perception will give a richer insight into the processes taking place in the interactions that constitute the network.

### **Structures in the Core Networks**

Analysing sub-groups in networks involves identifying members who are significantly more densely connected than the network overall. For this analysis clusters of three or more who were all connected to each other were identified, referred to in SNA as cliques (Borgatti, M. G. Everett & J. C. Johnson, 2013 pg. 183) (See Appendix 3b for technical detail about cliques).

Analysis revealed seven cliques with three or more members in both instrumental and expressive networks. Table 13 summarises the membership.

7 cliques found in instrumental network	7 cliques found in expressive network
1: George (C3), Harry (C3A1), Isabella (C3A10), Sophia (C3A11), Leo (C3A12)	1: George (C3), Harry (C3A1), Isabella (C3A10), Sophia (C3A11), Leo (C3A12)
2: George (C3), Harry (C3A1), Sophia (C3A11), Leo (C3A12) Noah (C3A3)	2: George (C3), Harry (C3A1), Sophia (C3A11), Noah (C3A3)
3: George (C3), Harry (C3A1), Ella (C3A13) Grace (C3A14), Poppy (C3A15), Charlotte (C3A16)	3: George (C3), Harry (C3A1), Noah (C3A3) Isla (C3A5)
4: George (C3), Harry (C3A1), Jack (C3A4) Isla (C3A5)	4: Harry (C3A1), Ella (C3A13) Poppy (C3A15), Charlotte (C3A16)
5: George (C3), Isabella (C3A10), Sophia (C3A11), Leo (C3A12) Ava C3A2	5: Harry (C3A1), Ava (C3A2) Noah (C3A3)
6: George (C3), Sophia (C3A11), Leo (C3A12) Ava C3A2 Noah (C3A3)	6: Ella (C3A13) Grace (C3A14), Poppy (C3A15), Charlotte (C3A16)
7: George (C3), Ava (C3A2) Jack (C3A4)	7: George (C3), Jack (C3A4) Isla (C3A5)

Table 13: Membership of Cliques in the Consensus view of Core Networks

The cliques in the instrumental network listed in Table 13 have some clear groupings:

- secondary headteachers with varying combinations of central staff
- primary headteachers and central staff
- central staff and trustees only

There are no cliques in which primary and secondary headteachers appear together.

The cliques in the expressive network have similar but slightly distinct groupings:

- varying combinations of secondary headteachers with central staff
- primary headteachers and central staff
- central staff and trustees only

- primary headteachers only

There are also no cliques in which primary and secondary headteachers appear together.

Individuals are members of multiple overlapping cliques. CEO George is in every clique in the instrumental network and Director of Education Harry, four. In the Expressive network, Harry is in five cliques and George, four.

The cliques are generally smaller in the expressive network; only two contain as many as five members, whereas in the instrumental network only two contain less than five. There were fewer ties and less dense patterns in the expressive network.

The next sections focus on the cliques, highlighting distinctive characteristics in the networks, relating them to themes in the qualitative analysis, and exploring varying perceptions of the networks by focusing first on George and Harry, and then two of the headteachers, Charlotte and Poppy.

### ***Instrumental Network***

Fig. 10 shows groupings of membership in the instrumental network by highlighting three cliques on the visualisation that represent the groupings. The number of the clique on the diagram refers to the groups in Table 13.

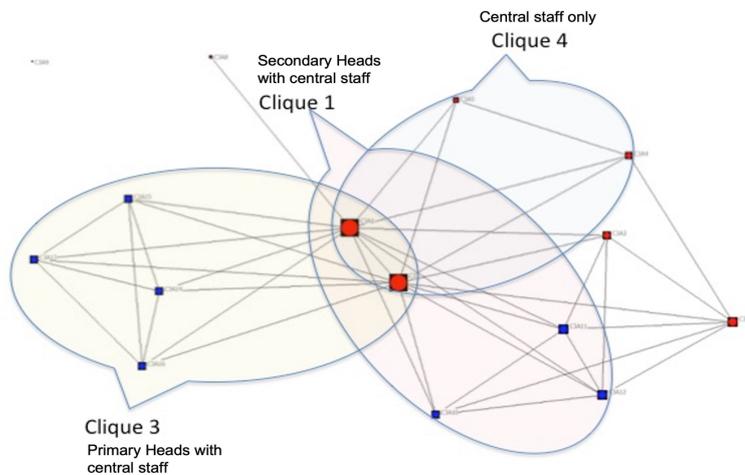


Figure 10: Cliques in Instrumental Network.

Clique 1 – secondary headteachers with Harry and George

Clique 3 – primary headteachers with Harry and George

Clique 4 – Harry and George and two trustees, Isla and Jack

It would be an over-simplification to characterise George and Harry's roles as simply representing hierarchical relationships, their involvement in the cliques notwithstanding. Within each clique, each member is tied to every other member in what can be described as lateral connections. The active involvement of central trust staff in instrumental and operational practices with headteachers is an important finding as it relates to the perceived relationships between schools and the central trust and associated identities. Understanding the nature of the interaction and processes is also needed and is now explored further from the perspective of different participants.

#### *Differing perspectives: George and Harry*

The perspective of George and Harry was chosen because of the evidence of how central they were in the networks, and the research focus on the formal Executive

Leader role and the enactment of leadership.

George recognised the importance of his relationship with Harry in achieving what he saw as one of the main purposes, to create 'a more cohesive group of schools'.

Harry saw his relationships with schools as having multiple aspects:

So I see my role to support the headteachers ... There are times that they need, I think, personal support for their role but it's also a role of holding to account ... Sometimes the agenda is entirely theirs ... or it's talking about progress against the school development plan or recent data analysis that needs to be done. (Harry, Director of Education)

Harry draws simultaneously on the ideas of collaborative working together and also hierarchical relationships. George in his interview drew a diagram (Fig. 11) to represent how he saw the pattern of relationships changing in NMAT.

So NMAT was seen as overarching and then NMAT had relationships with the seven schools. So each of the seven schools would have been separate ... Now ... I would say that NMAT is in the centre ... the four primary schools now are linking to each other much more closely than they were before. (George, CEO)

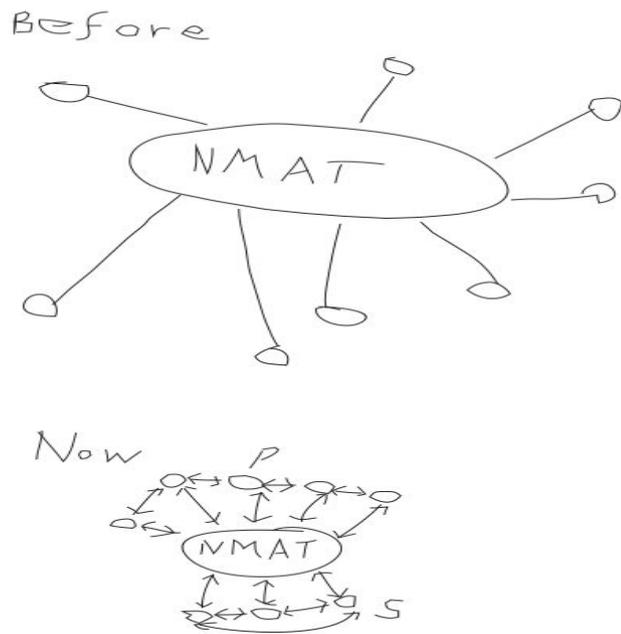


Figure 11: George's Diagram - NMAT and the schools

George's representation of 'Now' was similar to the pattern of cliques identified in the instrumental networks shown in Fig. 10. Although placing NMAT staff in a central position, George and Harry did not see the nature of the interactions as exclusively hierarchical, however.

George and Harry both spoke of specific, educationally focused practices between schools:

How we deliver literacy, how we deliver numeracy, how we coordinate our special educational needs, how we work with pupil premium ... so that we're getting more common approaches across the trust to do those kinds of things. And that didn't use to happen, each school was very much an island that just had a relationship with NMAT separately. (George, CEO)

George's references to literacy, numeracy and students with special needs are all broadly in the domain of Leadership of Learning. His account suggests he sees the

lateral, collaborative links as enacting common approaches to the practices, with coordination implying some planning. Lateral links are evident in his diagram and in Fig. 6 in the consensus view of the instrumental network.

George's account suggests he sees the trust team as having a role in engendering collaborative working. His and Harry's involvement in the sub-groups of secondary and primary headteachers is a reflection of hierarchical positions, but the frames of collaboration and autonomy are elements of interactions.

George and Harry's individual perceptions of the Core Network offer additional insights. Fig. 12 shows the networks constructed from their responses, two of the CSS networks that contributed to the consensus view. George and Harry are circled, showing their position in their networks.

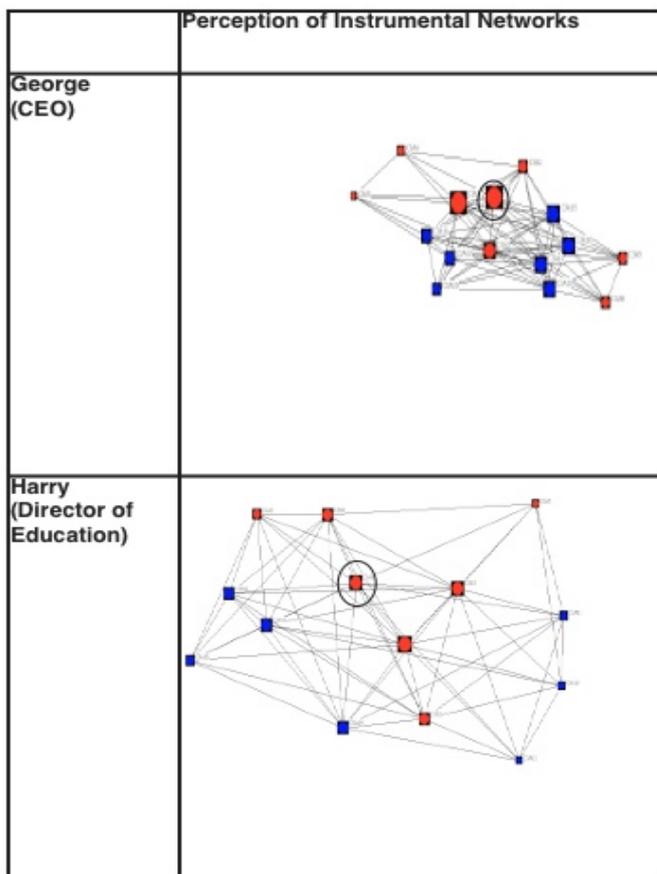


Figure 12: George and Harry’s perceptions of the instrumental Core Networks

The patterns in Fig. 12 are similar to the consensus view, with the same sub-groups evident suggesting George and Harry’s perceptions of the Core Networks are broadly shared with others. The number and density of interactions perceived by both George and Harry are far greater than the consensus, however, implying their beliefs about the organisation in terms of increasing collaboration are reflected in their perceptions of the networks.

*Differing perspectives: Poppy and Charlotte*

Another set of perspectives, likely to differ from that of George and Harry, were chosen to explore the variation in perspectives on the Core Network further. Charlotte and Poppy’s respective recent experiences were different from other headteachers

in the trust and had some similarities to each other.

Poppy and Charlotte had both taken up their respective posts as a result of actions by NMAT's central trust team.

The leadership that is here now is as a result of being part of the organisation (NMAT) ... The head of S7, for example, used to be the deputy of S4. (Poppy, HT S6)

S7 was the school to which Charlotte had moved a few months previously:

I had a three week turnaround ... (was asked to come here) by the NMAT. (Charlotte, HT S7)

The central team enacted hierarchical authority in NMAT to appoint Poppy and Charlotte, who nevertheless spoke with a strong sense of agency, for example, about making plans for their schools:

I think very much I'm driving where I want to go as the school and I am informing them (NMAT) this is my plan and they're kind of in agreement with my plan, rather than actually sitting with me to shape that plan in the first place. (Poppy, School S6)

Our school development plan, I had to talk it all through with Harry, I wrote it with SLT (Senior Leadership Team) looking at our children, our contexts, our data and our context ... all schools are different so all our drivers are different. (Charlotte, S7)

Leaders at school level perceived they had the scope to behave autonomously, whilst recognising the formal authority, in organisational terms, of the trust.

Poppy and Charlotte's individual perceptions of the Core Network also offer valuable insights. Fig. 13 shows their perceptions of the instrumental Core Network. Poppy and Charlotte's positions are shown by a circle.

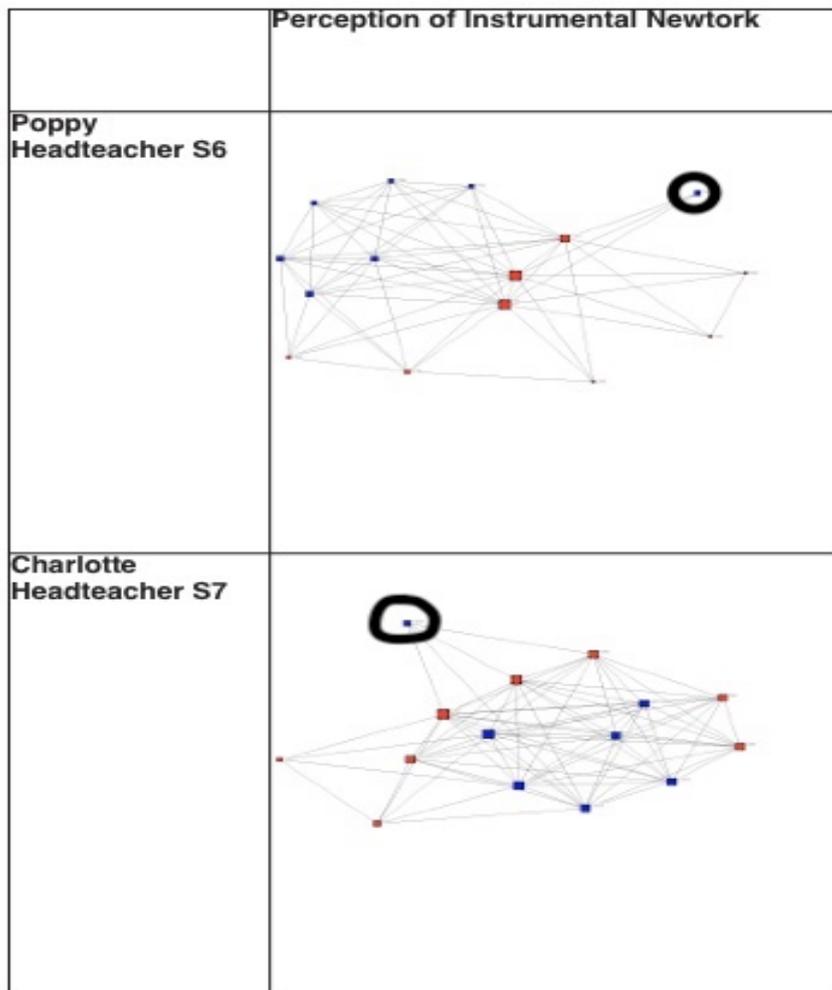


Figure 13: Poppy and Charlotte's perceptions of the instrumental Core Networks

Poppy and Charlotte's perceptions are strikingly similar to each other and distinct from George and Harry's and the consensus view. They are visibly isolated from the network, interacting only with George, Harry and the Chief Operating Officer, Ava, and perceive headteachers as a single, largely cohesive group with a dense pattern of interactions.

Poppy and Charlotte's view could be interpreted as a simple hierarchical relationship between their schools and the trust; the qualitative data suggests a more nuanced picture, however. Both were involved in collaborative activity with the other schools

in the trust.

So we've been very well supported by the wider NMAT network to try and make the school as a success really ... (We) have primary meetings, discussing things that are common across the schools and how we're going to improve them. Pupil premium, for example, so we'll do that sort of work at a heads' level. (Poppy, S6)

Poppy and Charlotte's perceptions of the instrumental network can thus be seen as a reflection of the relative significance they attributed to the hierarchical relationship with the trust. Their accounts revealed both their sense of agency and autonomy and that, for them, balancing hierarchy and autonomy appears to dominate over notions of collaboration. They perceived collaboration as a significant feature in the interactions of others.

Their perception of the networks is, arguably, shaped by the interactions taking place, their identity as headteachers in the context of how they took up their roles, the particular history and identity of the schools that they joined, and their own priorities at that moment in time.

#### *Instrumental Networks: Reflections and Findings*

The accounts of George, Harry, Poppy and Charlotte exemplify the general point that there are differing perceptions of the network of relationships which influence behaviours and actions.

Poppy and Charlotte were aware of both the hierarchical relationships and their own autonomy in relation to Planning, shaped by a particular history and context in which they work. George and Harry perceived and took part in significant collaboration amongst heads alongside their own formal hierarchical positions, particularly in relation to practices related to Leading Learning but also Planning.

The interplay between hierarchy collaboration and autonomy was different in relation to the same practices for these two pairs of actors.

## **Expressive Network**

Fig. 14 shows the distinct groupings in the expressive network by highlighting four of the cliques on the visualisation. The number of the clique on the diagram refers to the groups in Table 12.

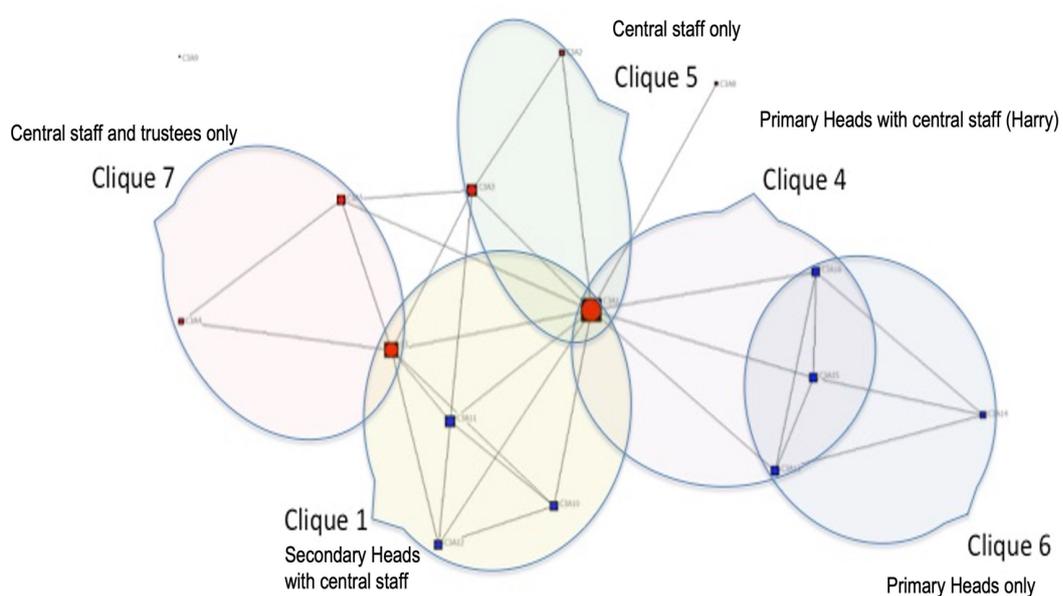


Figure 14: Cliques in Expressive Network.

Clique 1 – Secondary headteachers with Harry and George

Clique 7 – Trustees (Jack and Isla) and George

Clique 5 – Central Staff, Harry, Ava (COO) and Noah (Dir. of IT)

Clique 4 – Three Primary Heads and Harry.

Clique 6 – Primary Heads Only

The cliques in the expressive network are smaller than in the instrumental network. Notably, Clique 6 comprises only primary heads and Clique 4 involves only Harry from the central team. Harry is most central in this network but is not uniformly involved in cliques.

The patterns are less reflective of the organisational structures suggesting a degree of independence amongst the groups in the expressive relations and implying more autonomous interactions. There is less uniform involvement of the central trust team in the subgroups.

Varying perceptions are again explored from the perspective of first George and Harry, and then Charlotte and Poppy.

#### *Differing Perspectives: George and Harry*

I suggested previously, reflecting on Positions and Context of the Core Network, that expressive relations in the network play a role in enactment of practices, citing actions addressing Culture as an example. George, Harry and other central staff referred to trying to develop mutual confidence and trust between school staff and the central trust:

I think we've made massive inroads ... with the primary heads in particular ... we've been able to provide them with direct support ... we've been [able] to deploy some colleagues to support them ... I think we've developed a much more cohesive, collegiate way of seeing one another. I think there's still work to do with the secondaries. (Harry, Director of Education)

A slightly different set of leadership practices are evident compared to the instrumental network in that, whilst Harry overtly relates support to both Learning and Pedagogy and to Managing People, he also sees these interactions as a means to developing a culture in terms of how leaders are 'seeing one another'. Support and actions aimed at 'winning hearts and minds' were initiatives of the central team to develop the 'cohesive way of seeing each other' to which Harry referred. I am linking

such actions, at least to some extent, with expressive interactions in the Core Network.

Harry and George both saw the expressive Core Network as well connected, similar in structure to the consensus view, and involving trust staff. Fig. 15 shows their perceived networks.

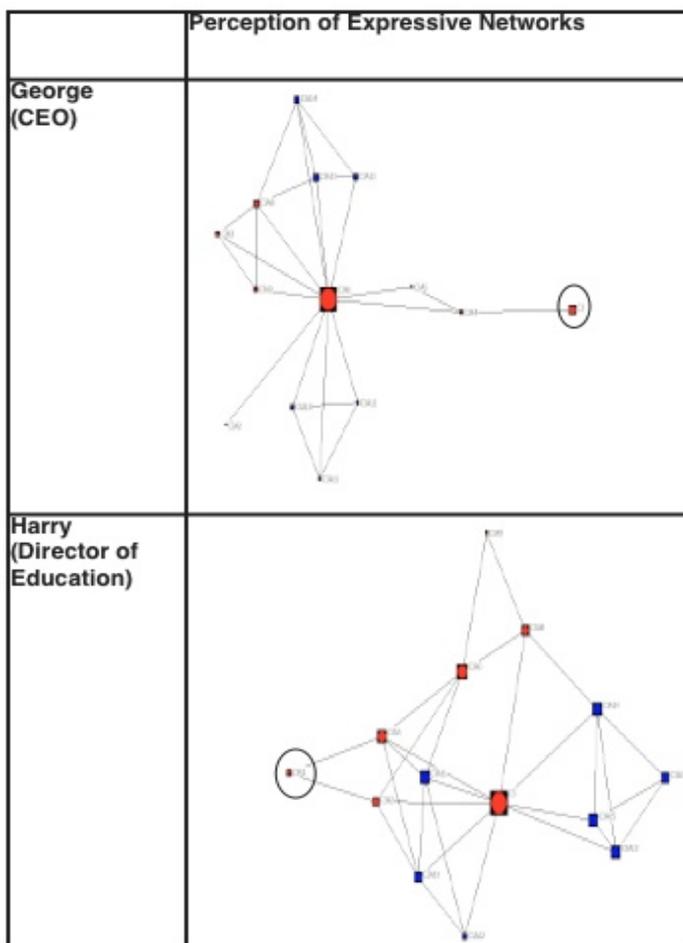


Figure 15: George and Harry's perceptions of expressive Core Network

Their perceptions were markedly different in how they saw themselves and each other in the network. Neither sees the other as a tie in the expressive network, George perceived Harry to be very central and himself with just one tie; Harry sees it the other way round, with George as very central and himself with two ties.

Analysis of individual egocentric networks in section 5.1 showed perceiving others as more connected than themselves in the expressive networks was a general trend. The reflexive perception notwithstanding, George and Harry’s shared perception of the network arguably reflects their perception of the organisation becoming more ‘cohesive and collegiate’.

*Differing Perspectives: Poppy and Charlotte*

Poppy and Charlotte’s perceptions of the core expressive network (Fig. 16) are a sharp contrast to George and Harry’s. They both interact with only one other person in the Core Network. Poppy identified Harry as a tie, and Charlotte identified another headteacher within the Core Network. Whilst they perceive the expressive Core Network as having some ties amongst others, there is no overall interconnectedness – it is seen as very fragmented. For both, most of their expressive interactions are outside the Core Network.

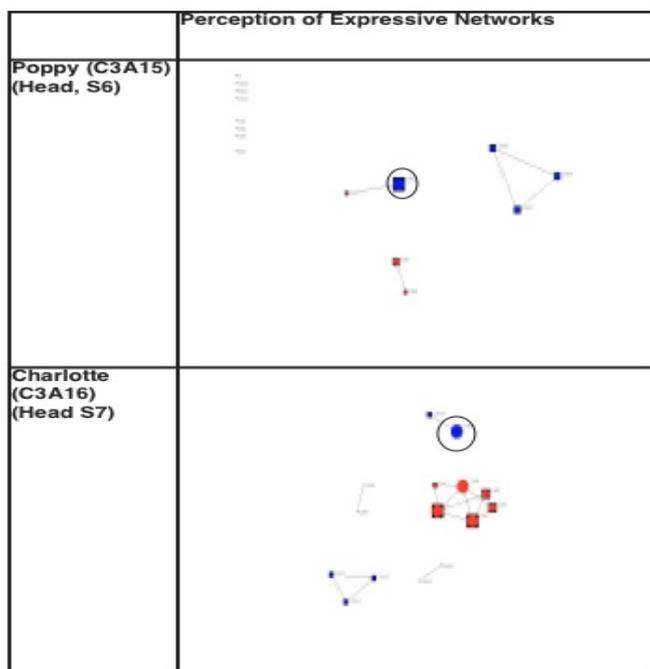


Figure 16: Poppy and Charlotte’s perceptions of expressive Core Network

Most of the headteachers perceive the expressive network as very fragmented (See Appendix 3c for the full set of diagrams). George and Harry's contrasting perception of greater connectedness in this network is common to the trust staff. The difference in perception between trust staff and headteachers is significant, reflecting a less cohesive view of relationships within the trust by headteachers in regard to expressive relations.

### *Expressive Networks: Reflections and Findings*

Analysis of cliques suggested expressive interactions occurred in more independent groups and more autonomously than instrumental interactions. Autonomy is also reflected in individuals' personal networks by a tendency to place themselves outside dense networks for expressive relationships. Typically, most of an individual's interactions were outside the Core Network, notwithstanding the overlap with the Core Network.

Qualitative analysis suggested activities related to the practice of People and Culture – and to an extent, Developing a Vision – involved expressive interactions. It is significant, therefore, that expressive relations are perceived to be substantially outside the expressive Core Network.

The practices broadly associated with expressive interactions are thus different from those associated with instrumental relations. As patterns of leadership relations and groupings are also different for expressive and instrumental relations, this suggests patterns of leadership relations vary between practices.

The frames of collaboration and hierarchy were expressed in interactions alongside autonomy. The lateral exchanges taking place within cliques can be characterised as collaborative. Participants' awareness of organisational roles and hierarchy also influenced which interactions amongst the Core Network were selected, and

mediates the nature of those interactions.

### 5.3 Networks: Summary of Findings

The analysis of networks has explored two types of interaction, instrumental and expressive, and revealed the complexity of the networks of communication and interaction in which individuals are embedded. The consensus view of the Core Network reflects those aspects of the networks about which perceptions overlap and are largely shared. No individual's perceptions were exactly the same as the consensus.

The specific patterns detailed in the analysis of the consensus views of the Core Networks can be characterised as a 'mixed combination of solo performance in combination with dyadic, team and other multi-party formations' (Gronn, 2009 pg. 389). The mixed combinations included central staff and trustees, primary headteachers and secondary headteachers, the dyad of George and Harry, and George as the CEO. The networks represent the configuration of leadership relationships in NMAT.

Participants typically selected instrumental for different reasons than for expressive interactions, resulting in different patterns of relationships in the networks. Instrumental ties were perceived to be the key, most significant and most frequent instrumental interactions in relation to educational improvement activities. Expressive ties selected were generally long-standing professional relationships or strong personal relationships, the latter not necessarily with direct educational experience. Selections took account of NMAT's institutional roles, which, when ties were identified within the Core Network, to an extent mediated interactions.

Different blends of leadership practices were enacted in instrumental and expressive networks. Instrumental networks reflected interactions related more to Leadership for

Learning and Planning, whilst the expressive network interactions related more to People and Culture and Developing a Vision and Goals. There was not a neat division between the two types of interaction across all domains of practice; however, the difference is describing a broad tendency. Nevertheless, an implication was that patterns of relationships varied between practices for the same groups of actors.

Comparing George, Harry, Charlotte and Poppy's accounts of enacting instrumental interactions showed the patterns of relations varied between groups of actors for the same practices. The patterns of relationships thus varied both between groups for the same practice and between practices for the same groups.

Patterning of interactions and influence in leadership relations was complex and emergent both within and between practices. Consensus views of the networks present the enduring patterns that are perceived, but within that, the evidence is that there is considerable contextual variety. Poppy and Charlotte's accounts and perceptions illustrate how organisational and personal history also influence the enactment of practices.

The analysis suggests that the interplay of ideas of hierarchy, collaboration and autonomy are expressed differently in the two types of interactions. Awareness of hierarchical roles was more strongly a feature in instrumental interactions, with collaborative activity reflected in lateral interactions. Autonomy was evident in participants' accounts, nevertheless; hierarchy and autonomy were the main consideration for Poppy and Charlotte, for instance. The balance varied between actors. In expressive relations, the idea of autonomy was more strongly reflected in structures and the limited overlap between personal egocentric networks and the Core Network, alongside lateral collaborative interactions within cliques. Hierarchy was seen to influence selections and mediate interactions. The three frames were all taken up in both types of interaction, but generally with different emphases.

The categories of instrumental and expressive interactions are a meaningful analytic distinction; they may not always be so clearly distinguished in their enactment, however. I have noted that it is often the case that the same individuals are involved in both types of interaction. When Poppy identifies Harry as both a tie in the instrumental and the expressive networks, there may well be occasions on which interactions have the character of both instrumental and expressive interactions as a particular group of practices is enacted. Further, there will be instances where the expressive and instrumental relations interact. For example, Sophia (HT S1) consciously identified an external coach – a quintessentially expressive interaction – with whom she might well discuss instrumental interactions within the organisation.

There is not a simple characterisation or categorisation of the patterns and nature of interactions between individuals and within groups in NMAT. The analysis identifies specific patterns representing the perceived configuration in NMAT and illustrates the plurality of the sources of influence on individual headteachers, schools and executive leaders. Using qualitative data alongside network analysis has highlighted additional, shifting dimensions to the complexity individuals experience.

# Chapter 6: Discussion

Chapter 1 characterised the complexity for leaders in multi-school groups as arising from successive structural reforms over time and the specifics of local contexts in terms of histories, existing relationships and individual agency. I have proposed that understanding and explaining how executive leadership for educational improvement is enacted in a MAT gives an insight into the responses of the leaders involved to the complexity they experience. In this chapter, the findings from the qualitative and network data analysis are discussed to show how combining concepts from sensemaking, SNA and leadership means the case of NMAT makes a distinctive contribution to understanding efforts to bring about educational improvement amid complexity and change.

The first part of this chapter will consider how sensemaking is taking place in the network of relationships in NMAT, discussing the significant place of the central team and then the variety of settings in which sensemaking is taking place. Leadership throughout NMAT beyond schools is explored and insights from combining qualitative and network analysis are set out. The CEO's role as the principal executive leader is discussed, highlighting distinctive features of executive leadership, and, finally, some implications of the research in terms of understanding MATs as organisations are considered.

## 6.1 Sensemaking

### **Sensemaking, Power and Sensegiving**

Analysis of participants' narratives highlighted perceptions of changes in relationships within the trust that affected educational practices. Some aspects of the changes can be seen as a stimulus for sensemaking, or in Weick's terms, a cue. One such cue was the change of leadership in NMAT when George took up the CEO role. Other cues were provided by activities initiated by the central team, something they were able to do by virtue of their hierarchical positions in the organisation, and it is the central team's role I consider first. George's view of an overarching purpose of his

role as being to create a more 'cohesive, collaborative group of schools' provides a focus for this part of the discussion.

The central team of Harry, Director of Education, the Expert Practitioner, Emily and Director of IT, Noah understood and shared George's goal. The central team orchestrated various activities – events that involved all staff in the trust – holding regular meetings to discuss and review plans, negotiating collection and sharing data about students in all schools. All had an overt instrumental intention, but can also be understood in terms of a process of sensemaking.

Weick summarises sensemaking as a cycle of enactment, selection and retention. He associates enactment with 'reciprocal exchanges between actors' responding to changes in their environment; selection with giving experiences meaning prompted by cues; and identity with retention of meanings and narratives (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005).

The goal of a cohesive group of schools can be seen as proffering an organisational identity. Involving heads and schools in activities beyond their own institutions, sharing and reviewing data together, for example, was arguably enacting the identity. Activities initiated by the central team were not the only ones taking place in NMAT. The point being addressed here is how it is that some identities, narratives and enactments came to be given more attention and be more influential. The qualitative analysis found that identities were challenged by the process of reconstituting NMAT, which involved working across boundaries, redefining and negotiating them.

A critique of sensemaking has been that insufficient attention is paid to the significance of power and how that impacts sensemaking (Helms Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010). The discussion of the conceptual framework introduced Elias' (1978) conception of power as 'figurations' (ibid.) of constraining–enabling relations

emerging from ongoing interactions. I am linking the hierarchical position of George, Harry and the central team with their orchestration of particular activities as an expression of power. George and the team were alert to the symbolic significance of the activities, regarding them as means of communicating the goal whilst enacting familiar practices, arguably causing headteachers to change the way they enacted the practices as a consequence. Responses were dependent on the interaction between individuals within and between organisations – sensemaking in this analysis is conceived of as a social, reciprocal process.

The central team did not see their actions as simply demanding and securing compliance with specific behaviours – arguably hierarchical power par excellence. Director of Education, Harry and Primary Expert, Emily, for example, talked in terms of ‘winning hearts and minds’ and George and Harry spoke of building trust.

The actions of George and the central team can be characterised as sensegiving:

attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organisational reality. (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007 pg. 57) – citing Gioia and Chippendi, 1991

The sensegiving of the central team took many forms alongside selecting activities for their symbolic significance. Particular social interactions were promoted by, for example, holding regular meetings of headteachers, of deputy headteachers in primary schools and of chairs of governing bodies. Particular cues were selected and highlighted: for example, differences between how some groups of students achieved compared to others. Meanings were highlighted that drew on what was perceived as shared professional values and beliefs: for example, equity. The intention was arguably seeking to ‘shape what people accept, take for granted, accept and reject’ (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005 pg. 418).

There were occasions when hierarchical structures were more directly asserted. Poppy and Charlotte had both become headteachers of their respective schools after

a direct exercise of authority by the central team, for example. Such activities can also be seen as part of the sensegiving, as they will influence identity and relationships within the trust and play a part in the reciprocal responses of the central team and headteachers.

I am arguing here that the influence and power of the central team of NMAT were largely expressed through sensegiving actions that included direct assertions of hierarchical authority, and which promoted particular identities and narratives. The agency and autonomy of headteachers were implicitly recognised alongside promoting ways of working that the central team described as collaborative. The emerging pattern of relationships was thus, in part, a response to the sensegiving actions of the central team and the overtly articulated understandings, arrived at through a social process, of the meaning and purpose of actions and practices.

### **Identities and Cues for Sensemaking**

The patterns of relationships and responses of headteachers were not simply a consequence of the sensegiving actions of the central team, whose sensegiving – ‘sensemaking undertaken to create meaning for a target audience’ (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005 pg. 417) – was one amongst multiple influences within and beyond the networks. The discussion now highlights the many sources of cues for sensemaking, and the relevance of identities.

The notion of ‘cohesive groups of schools’ and greater collaboration was a goal developed by George and the trustees together. Chair of trustees, Jack, expressed a view of the trust as having a role and a place within its local context; George articulated an instrumental effectiveness rationale in terms of school improvement; trustee Isla had spoken of research into the practice of other trusts in terms of the efficacy of the goal. In summary, an organisational identity was being formed from several points of view: a geographic focus; values and beliefs relating to equity; purposes of schools; and efficacy of strategies.

When talking about individual identities, Weick suggests it is important to avoid the trap of thinking of isolated individuals. Identities are formed in relation to something else, by what is 'out there' in a process of interaction (Weick, 1995 pg. 20). 'Out there' in the context of NMAT and organisational identity is taken to mean the wider environment, interacting with what individuals notice and select, with their taken-for-granted frames of thinking, and with the existing structures and organisational arrangements. The sensemaking process underlying the organisational identity of 'a more cohesive group of schools' was thus multi-faceted, not simply an application of an external 'blueprint' for a multi-academy trust, for example, and importantly, had an implication for individuals' professional identity. The wider environment of ideas, policies, local context and history were nevertheless an important influence.

The wider group of headteachers were also situated within the wider environment of ideas, policies, local context and history. Influences were not simply mediated by the central team but also acted directly. A small example is that of Isabella (HT, S3) speaking about her school's curriculum and reviewing it partly as a direct response to changes to inspections of schools. A parallel development was a discussion initiated by the central team about the extent to which detailed curriculum plans might be coordinated between schools. Isabella and the trust's initiatives interacted, challenged boundaries and identities, and arguably were, separately and together, cues for sensemaking.

Processes in NMAT suggest, therefore, that there was not a single large disruption triggering sensemaking. Influences, change, and thus cues, were multiple, shifting continuously, and arising from ambiguities in the existing relationships and structures. Changes of personnel, external shifts in a variety of policies, changes in the local context and even shifts in perceptions and priorities of individuals and groups within NMAT all provide cues.

Sensemaking has been used in educational literature as an analytical and theoretical tool, but empirical studies in the context of reform and change are rarer. Recent studies have looked at the level of individual teachers (Rom & Eyal, 2019) at a school level (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019) and at the level of large groups of schools (Spillane et al., 2019), which Spillane et al. refer to as 'systems'. Rom and Eyal showed the changing professional identity of individual teachers in response to a specific reform to Early Years education; Ganon-Shilon and Schechter discussed responses at the school level to a specific national reform of secondary school practices, focusing on interactions between school principals and leaders within schools, and arguing for leaders to actively facilitate sensemaking activity to arrive at a 'school mindset'. Spillane et al. showed that leaders at the level of whole 'systems' – for example, urban districts or a group of charter schools – grapple with and reshape specific organisational identities whilst responding to a policy discourse like standards and accountability. Individual professional identities, sensemaking activities and interactions between leaders, responses to common discourses and reshaping organisational identities are all evident, as they are in the data and analysis of the case of NMAT.

The literature cited explores sensemaking largely in response to a single external change or significant education reform. Distinctively, the case of NMAT does not show responses to a single reform or initiative. Whilst, for example, standards and accountability, alongside the structural reforms associated with academies, provided cues and triggers for sensemaking, there were also cues provided by local context and events. The change of leadership in NMAT and efforts to develop the organisational identity were also a clear trigger for change. Those involved in leading NMAT and the schools, thinking about educational improvement, noticed a variety of cues. The sensemaking process in NMAT arose in response to a continuous stream of disruptions and changes, highlighting the ongoing nature of sensemaking, and the multiple and overlapping frames and discourses in the wider environment.

The findings of this study of NMAT relate closely to those of Spillane et al. (ibid. 2019) in respect of the efforts of leaders at the level of a group of schools to reshape organisational identity, and extends that of Spillane with an application to the specific context of an English multi-academy trust. How leaders sought to reshape organisational identity is illuminated, and the findings offer the insight that leaders are responding to a constant flow of cues and triggers, not just to a single external reform.

Considering the relevance of power, its relationship to sensegiving, and using SNA to reveal the structuring of relationships, make additional contributions. The discussion linked the hierarchical position of the central team to their ability to orchestrate activities that had a sensegiving dimension. Recognising that the influence of the central team is one locus amongst many, albeit an important one, suggests an emergent figuration of relations that both constrain and enable. The analysis of networks, combined with qualitative data, demonstrates an approach to gaining insights into the specific figuration in the context of NMAT.

### **Plural Sensemaking**

I now explore further the implications of the central team being one of multiple loci and the patterning of influencing relations. The challenge to and updating of identities was both individual and organisational, and occurred whenever sensemaking occurred. Network analysis showed the perceived patterns of relations amongst the participants, the interactions being occasions for sensemaking.

Headteachers' expressive interactions, for example, were relatively autonomous in relation to the central trust, and all participants as individuals to some extent drew on independent networks outside the Core Network. The substance of expressive interactions was, as discussed, frequently about the instrumental interactions and enactment of practices. Sensemaking processes were taking place not just in interactions between the headteachers and CEO George and Director of Education Harry. The processes were couched in smaller cliques within the Core Network,

between each individual and wider, sometimes overlapping, networks, potentially producing different narratives and identities, and drawing on different histories and contextual knowledge.

In Poppy and Charlotte's accounts in the network analysis, and in that of Grace (HT Primary S5), there was awareness, explicitly stated in Grace's case, of balancing a school's priorities alongside those of the trust. Poppy and Charlotte were forging an identity as headteachers in their own school, whilst clearly recognising their position within NMAT. Grace, headteacher of S5, referred to '(getting) the balance right' between trust priorities and what she saw as right for her school and context. A similar tension was articulated by Isabella (HT S1) amongst the group of secondary heads who had been used to agreeing between them areas on which to cooperate. Changes in the formal leadership in NMAT, and plans introduced by the trust, implied a similar dilemma to Grace's of 'getting the balance right'.

Weick draws on concepts of distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1995) to describe individuals and groups, whilst holding parts of a picture, organising and sensemaking separately. Weick refers to this as distributed sensemaking (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005), a process in which the structuring of the existing environment plays a part. A consequence of the distribution, Weick argues, is that where differences in perception are not or cannot be resolved,

multiple theories develop about what is happening and what needs to be done. (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005 pg. 418).

NMAT exists in a specific social context with emergent frames and discourses on which participants drew, and from which individuals and groups noticed cues in the form of information and events. The context both shaped and was shaped by individuals' interactions. Network analysis has revealed participants' perceptions of its structure. The 'sense' could be considered to be 'stretched over' the participants and the context, echoing Spillane's conception of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006).

SNA has revealed a consensus in the perceptions of participants of the patterning of relationships. Further analysis has identified the separate groups within which sensemaking is perceived to be occurring. The multiple theories to which Weick refers inevitably develop and lead to differing understandings or meanings attributed to events and, arguably, identities. The evidence and accounts presented suggest 'equivalent or parallel understandings' (Weick, *op. cit.*) in relation to educational improvement were developing, rather than wholly shared. The understandings were 'sense' that was developed collectively by the sub groups.

An example of parallel understandings was perceptions of the degree of collaboration amongst groups of headteachers. Primary heads expressed the view that, as Harry put it, 'a cohesive, collegiate way of seeing one another' was more developed amongst primary than secondary heads. Secondary heads Sophia and Isabella were unequivocal in their perception of collaboration amongst the secondary heads.

Interdependent working continued in NMAT, parallel understandings amongst participants and different parts of NMAT notwithstanding. One source of coordination of individuals and groups was the existing formal organisational relationships, expressed through the governance and management arrangements of the MAT. Another source of coordination was the broadly shared frames such as standards and accountability, equity, or the importance of pedagogy. The shared frames, albeit with overlapping and parallel understandings, appear to play a greater role in the overtly educational practices that were less tightly directed, and in which a greater variety of actions was evident. Arguably, frames contribute to the coordination of activity by forming the basis for partly shared or overlapping assumptions about the relevance or importance of particular activities and plans.

In Chapter 2, Plural Leadership was used to recognise leadership as not simply being focused on single individuals, groups, or on identical shared goals. The term, it was argued, allows for a wider array of groupings than envisaged by Distributed

Leadership. A similar conception of Plural Sensemaking is arguably a useful construction to capture the notion that there is not a single shared process of sensemaking taking place, but multiple, parallel and overlapping processes in a diverse array of groupings. The groupings can be characterised in the same way as influencing relations; dyads, teams, multi-party groupings. The sensemaking in the groupings is understood as an overt social process. Plural Sensemaking, like Plural Leadership allows for the idea that multiple groupings and the processes within them coexist within the organisation. Additionally, sensegiving has been discussed in relation to the actions of the central team. The concept can equally be applied to the actions of leaders within the multiple settings for sensemaking, contributing to the process of Plural Sensemaking.

Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2019) argue for a single mindset to be developed by leaders in a school through a process of sensemaking. The analysis of NMAT shows multiple 'senses' emerge even as the central trust team sought to project a particular understanding, or to 'sensegive'. Ganon-Shilon and Schechter acknowledge the complexity of the sensemaking process; the evidence from NMAT of plural sensemaking and sensegiving is that their analysis overstates the extent to which a single organisational mindset or sense can be developed.

### **Sensemaking and Complexity**

The discussion of sensemaking has further exemplified features of complexity and individuals' responses to it. Stacey suggests that the experience of complexity and emergent change includes paradox, ambiguity and equivocality. The discussion of how multiple senses arise, and the examples of tensions experienced by headteachers, are examples of paradox and ambivalence. The variety that emerged as a consequence is an example of equivocality, resulting from the experience of complexity.

The idea of selection also links the process of sensemaking to responses to

complexity. Biesta (2010) argues that, faced with complexity in organising, people seek to reduce complexity by controlling and reducing options for action. Selection is a central feature of sensemaking, exemplified by interactions participants reflectively selected to represent their networks. Selections and strategies to reduce complexity were not arbitrary, but were responses to the environment, and some of the leadership practices described can be understood as deliberate or instinctive moves to reduce complexity. The focus of the first part of the discussion on sensemaking – George’s articulation of the goal of a more cohesive group of schools – can be seen as an attempt to reduce complexity within NMAT.

The discussion has highlighted the significance of figurations of power relations in giving some sensemaking processes and narratives more priority, characterising the actions of the central team as sensegiving. Sensemaking in NMAT was a continuing response to a stream of cues, not a response to a single significant change. Multiple, equivalent and parallel understandings and identities emerge as plural sensemaking takes place in diverse groupings of people.

The interactions in NMAT in which sensemaking occurs are also interactions in which leadership is produced. In that sense, the interactions constitute leadership in the organisation. I now consider leadership throughout NMAT beyond schools, and then in relation to the CEO’s role.

## **6.2 Leadership**

Sensemaking has offered a means of analysing some of the processes taking place in NMAT and thus some of the means by which people and groups were influenced. This is not to say that sensemaking and leadership are the same. Leadership, understood as influence, arises from multiple loci. The various acts of communication and interaction involved in leadership shape and contribute to the narratives and sensemaking of individuals and groups, and those acts are themselves shaped by

those narratives and sensemaking. We consider first the patterning of interactions.

## **Patterns of Leadership Relationships and Configurations**

The network analysis detailed the specific patterns found in the consensus views of the Core Networks. The conceptual framework introduced the idea of a hybrid configuration:

A mixed combination of solo performance in combination with dyadic, team and other multi-party formations. (Gronn, 2009 pg. 389)

The analysis made clear the 'mixed combination' (ibid.) was present: 'dyadic' in the case of George and Harry; 'team' in the case of the central trust staff; and 'other multi-party formations' in the case of groups of headteachers or headteachers and central trust staff. Denis, Langley and Sergi (2012 pg. 219) distinguished the nature of leadership in such groupings: pooled leadership in a dyad, shared leadership in a team, and distributed leadership across levels. With multiple forms and concentrations of influence all present together, Gronn's characterisation of the patterns as 'hybrid ... complex, fluid' (ibid.) is apt.

The consensus views represent participants' selections from many possible interactions in the constant flow of communication and interaction of which they were a part. Perceptions were subjective, but not arbitrary, being prompted by the interactions actually perceived as taking place. The configuration is a social, cognitive construct.

Other empirical studies have used Gronn's conceptualisation of hybrid leadership. Townsend (2015) investigated 'networks' of schools, in the sense of loose, mutually agreed partnerships. He found, using qualitative methods, contrasting patterns of leadership within and beyond schools, emphasising lateral, collaborative leadership between schools, overlaying and co-existing with formal structures within schools. Collett et al. (2019) investigated schools' responses to standards and accountability

reforms in the USA, investigating hierarchical and heterarchical (by which they meant 'lateral') relations. They found evidence of both being combined and argued that, on occasions, one enabled the other.

Chreim (2015) considered a non-education context of the merger and acquisition of four technology companies by a corporation. She contrasted distributed and non-distributed leadership of the four companies in the new structure. Chreim also introduced the idea of 'leadership space' as a metaphor for situations where the focus or subject of interactions involves ambiguity or uncertainty of roles. In the case of NMAT, interactions between the central trust team and individual schools might be an example. Chreim suggested the 'space' was contested in the merger.

The analyses of Townsend, Collet et al. and Chreim make binary distinctions between concentrated and less concentrated influence; formal structure or hierarchy versus collaboration (Townsend op. cit.); hierarchy versus heterarchy (Collet op. cit.); or distributed versus non-distributed (Chreim op. cit.). The binary distinction is insufficient to capture the diversity and complexity of the patterns of leadership relationships revealed in NMAT. Distinctive contributions this study makes are in identifying more complex patterns and using SNA to map the specific combinations.

### ***Extending Gronn***

Gronn refers to the configuration of relationships as hybrid and discusses them in terms of an undifferentiated set of relations, albeit combined in multiple groupings. This study explored two different types of relations, instrumental and expressive. The description of hybrid configuration can be applied equally to both types of interaction which occur simultaneously within the organisation. The implication here is that Gronn's conception needs at least to be extended.

Participants were often involved in instrumental and expressive interactions with the

same people. Poppy, HT of S7, for example, interacted with Harry in relation to planning, for instance, an instrumental interaction, but in the context of the group of primary headteachers, worked collaboratively. The group engaged with Harry in more expressive interactions. The two types of interaction, both between Harry and Poppy, were both potentially influencing relationships, but in different ways. For example, instrumental may be establishing norms and patterns of behaviour; expressive interactions potentially related to underlying values and principles that govern norms (James and Hawkins, 2017).

Relationships, when viewed from the point of view of those involved, can be characterised as 'multiplex'. Multiplex is a term widely used in SNA, meaning that the same relationship may have multiple strands (Crossley et al., 2019, pg. 6), or people may have multiple roles in a particular relationship, whether organisational or informal (Small, 2017, pg. 72).

Instrumental and expressive interactions are different in nature. Their different patterning in NMAT implies pairs or groupings of individuals may be interacting in different ways in the context of different configurations. Multiplexity adds a layer of complexity and fluidity, extending the notion of hybrid.

The content of interactions gives rise to further elements of fluidity in the patterns of relationships. The analysis and discussion have suggested that the frames of hierarchy, collaboration and autonomy were present in participants' accounts of interactions, and were in some way held in balance or tension. That is to say, frames are not separately characterisations of essential differences between interactions, but features present in all interactions that influence the way interactions take place. All three frames can be seen to condition or influence enactments.

For example, the analysis explored how the perceptions of Poppy and Charlotte

differed from the consensus view of the instrumental network. For the practice of planning, they appeared to be more aware of the extent of their autonomy in relation to the hierarchical role of the trust, acting with a different perception of the balance between the three frames. They perceived other heads to act more collaboratively in that practice. Ties in the same network of interactions may thus represent different expressions of hierarchy, autonomy and collaboration for those involved, even when enacting the same practice.

The network analysis also suggested patterns of relationships varied between practices, meaning if the practice changed, the balance of hierarchy, collaboration and autonomy would shift again. The types of interaction, patterns of relationships, content and intention of interactions in terms of frames and leadership practices were constantly in flux.

### ***From Configurations to Enactments***

The discussion suggests that the idea of a stable leadership configuration does not fully capture the variation and flux of the enactment of practices. The patterns of leadership in NMAT are dynamic. Perceptions of the emergent patterns of leadership relationships, as different leadership practices were enacted, have been analysed and represented by the consensus views of the Core Networks.

The relations between people are multiplex, however; different configurations exist simultaneously for different types of interaction. Within each configuration, the balance of hierarchy, autonomy and collaboration may be expressed differently in different relationships, and again be different for the same relationships but a different type of interaction or practice. I propose, therefore, talking in terms of a 'flow of enactment' rather than a configuration of relationships.

The ingredients of a flow of enactment would be: the different types of interaction;

the perceived configuration of relationships for each type; the balance of the frames within each interaction; and the intent of the interactions, including the leadership practices. The ingredients are elements to be combined in order to analyse and characterise an enactment of leadership in a specific context. Recognition of the ingredients of the flow allows a clearer reflection on the nature of the process of enacting practices, whilst retaining a focus on people interacting with people – ‘where the action is’, as Eddy-Spicer puts it (Eddy-Spicer, 2019 pg. 219)

An example illustrates the combination of elements. Primary headteachers worked together as a group to design a new curriculum for Early Years children and to develop some common routines for teachers introducing it. They worked collaboratively and autonomously from the trust central team as a group. Simultaneously, Grace (HT S6) changed the organisation of the Early Years phase in her own school, reorganising classes and the curriculum. She acted autonomously within her own school. In making the changes, Grace adhered to some closely managed financial and personnel processes determined by the central trust, reflecting a hierarchical relationship.

The flow of enactment amongst the primary headteachers consists of different configurations of relationships existing simultaneously: hierarchy, autonomy and collaboration as features of all interactions, but balanced differently in different interactions – a blend of leadership practices. Grace was engaged in Leadership for Learning and Managing and Changing, in both cases within and beyond her school. The interrelation of the frames is implied: hierarchical structures within the trust mediated collaboration between the heads, Grace’s autonomy in her school, and the co-evolution of the separate practices in distinct configurations.

### **Executive Leadership in NMAT and the Executive Leader**

The discussion has focused so far on the patterns of leadership relationships throughout NMAT beyond schools. I now consider the concept of executive

leadership further, before focusing more specifically on the principal executive leader, CEO George.

Leadership has been conceptualised as plural and relational. In distinguishing between executive leadership and leadership focused on an individual school, differences are not, I suggest, in the fundamental essence of interactions and relationships, but in the intentions informing interactions, between whom interactions take place and in the enactment of familiar practices in different contexts.

Chreim(2015) used the metaphor of 'space' in her study of a merger to refer to relationships and interactions in which leadership roles between organisations were defined, negotiated and reformed. 'Space' is a vivid way of characterising the interactions of relevance. In the context of NMAT, executive leadership relates to the 'space' on which we are concentrating, that is interactions and activities beyond the perceived boundaries of individual schools. The consensus views of the Core Networks map out the patterns of relationships that relate to executive leadership, as participants saw them. To put it another way, the networks visualise participants' collective perception of the executive leadership space.

This study has explored who was involved in leadership interactions in the executive leadership space in NMAT, and the range of practices enacted. The findings suggested that practices related to improvement were largely familiar and similar to those described in the literature for individual schools. They were, however, being enacted in a new space and, further, a distinctive feature of leadership in the space was the practice of reconstituting an organisation and redefining boundaries.

### ***The Executive Leader***

This study set out to understand both the enactment of the CEO role and executive leadership in the complex context of a MAT. The discussion will thus focus first on

George's role in NMAT. Analysis has detailed much of his perspective on how he carried out his role. An important aspect was that he chose actions or pursued initiatives for their symbolic significance. The choices were highlighted in the discussion of sensemaking and were characterised as sensegiving. George said:

Executive Leadership is about making the decision as to what battle to fight and what not to fight. (George, CEO)

The metaphor implies assertion of authority. Analysis showed the activities described were not ones that engendered conflict or were seeking direct compliance. The phrase was interpreted as alluding to an action's potential to communicate or enact a different reality.

Although executive leadership in the context of English schools is a relatively recent phenomenon, the term has a much longer history in the wider organisational literature, arguably providing the template for its use in the educational context. Much of the wider literature focuses on the actions of individual, designated executive leaders, the nature of their roles and particular characteristics of leaders. Hiller and Beauchesne's review (Hiller & Beauchesne, 2014) of the wider organisational literature suggests some distinctive features of executive roles: setting strategy; boundary spanning with the external environment; creating organisational systems and structures; indirect influence compared with leadership at lower levels; and activities that have a symbolic component, instituting and using symbols both through presence, actions, words, and artefacts.

The discussion of George's enactment of his role aligns closely with Hiller and Beauchesne's points, in particular, activities with a symbolic component, boundary spanning and designing structures and systems. A difficulty with isolating the specific features or practices in relation to executive leaders – as Hill also attempted in an early survey of MATs (Hill et al., 2012) – is that it is hard to argue that the practices are not also features of leadership roles more generally, headteachers, for example, in the NMAT context. The discussion will thus, as already noted, explore further the

difference made by enacting familiar practices in a new space.

The plural, relational perspective on leadership also makes clear leadership arises from diverse loci and is not exclusively identified with an individual. George's actions and priorities, summarised in generic terms by Hiller, take place in the context of the ongoing flow of interaction and communication.

#### *The flow of enactment in the Executive Leadership Space*

Considering the enactment of practices in the executive leadership space, the sensegiving actions of George, with the central team, provided cues for sensemaking with other leaders. Examples were the discussion about establishing more common approaches to the curriculum, or the initiative to share and discuss all schools' data. The reciprocal responses discussed in the sensemaking discussion suggested the emergence of 'multiple senses'. Chreim (ibid.) described the leadership space as ambiguous when interactions and redefinition of roles were taking place:

Ambiguous leadership spaces are undetermined spaces that offer opportunities for multiple framings, relational practices and role definitions ... As interactants enter these spaces, their practices help structure the emergent leadership configuration. (Chreim, 2015, pg. 537)

Chreim recognises the multiple understandings, with ambiguity extending to role definitions and, I would argue, identities. The emergence of multiple interrelated senses in the executive leadership space involves challenges to boundaries and identities for participants.

I have highlighted previously that the trust central team and headteachers were drawing on familiar ideas about educational improvement that they broadly shared. The empirical approach was to explore leaders' understanding and thinking about improvement without defining closely in advance what the practices might be. The findings in Chapter 4 note that practices were described using categories widely described in existing literature. We might say leaders were using the resources they

had to hand, in terms of their assumptions relating to effective educational improvement and views about their own context and the distinctiveness of individual schools. I have noted previously in the introduction in Chapter 1 and development of the conceptual framework in Chapter 2, that leaders are acting in a new context. The multiple interrelated senses I have referred to in the discussion in this chapter are enacted drawing on existing practices to act into the new and changing environment.

The term bricolage characterises the use of the resources readily available in a process of sensemaking and organisational design (Weick, 2001, pg. 62), and Brazer has argued for seeing educational leaders as 'bricoleurs' (Brazer, 2019). The term allows for the fact that resources may not be ideally suited to a new challenge or novel situation, but are assembled in the sensemaking process in a way that enables a response to new situations. The cues in NMAT include the sensegiving actions of George with his team.

To summarise briefly, CEO George acted in the executive leadership space with his team and through the key relationship with Director of Education Harry. Selecting and enacting sensemaking activities was an important means he chose. Enactment of practices can be seen as a bricolage, with George and the team as bricoleurs, drawing on familiar practices in the new context of the executive leadership space. An important distinctive practice was redefining the organisation, reshaping and working across boundaries. The emergence of multiple, interrelated senses is directly related to, but not solely determined by George and his team's actions, his influence being one amongst multiple loci within the context of NMAT, albeit a significant one.

### *Enactment and Complexity*

The experience of complexity includes ambiguity, paradox, and emergence (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000), all features of the experience of those involved in the executive leadership space, as identities were challenged. Ambiguity and paradox for individuals in relation to roles and identities are, I suggest, a consequence of enacting

leadership practices in complexity. The idea that some leadership practices can be seen as attempts to reduce complexity (Biesta, 2010) is helpful here.

Making selections involves reducing options and choosing 'which battles to fight', as George put it, and can be understood as attempting to reduce complexity by focusing on particular activities. Biesta (ibid.), makes the case that selections and choices bring forward questions of politics and power. George's 'choice of battles' were given prominence as a consequence of his and his team's hierarchical position, as I have discussed.

Ambiguity and paradox experienced in the executive leadership space arose in the case of NMAT, I suggest, in part from the challenge of reconstituting and reshaping boundaries and identities as familiar practices were enacted in the changing context of NMAT.

This study makes a contribution by presenting a still relatively rare study affording insights into how executive leadership is enacted in a MAT. Hughes (2019), in a case study of a single MAT, focused on the CEO, his agency, and the performance of what was a new role, as he was the founding leader of the MAT. Drawing on the work of Lipsky (1983) and the idea of street level bureaucracy, Hughes posits a typology of the ways the CEO works: being 'on the street' operationally, walking the street as a professional, visiting as a policy entrepreneur and beyond the street as a policy networker. The street functions as a concept similar to the idea of space, in that it defines relationships and interactions of importance, in Hughes' case those pertaining directly to the operation of schools.

There are instructive contrasts between NMAT and Hughes' case. In Hughes' case, the emphasis on the formation and change of a new organisation was very strong, with the CEO pivotal and central in events and decisions. He is also described as

being frequently present and visible in the schools in the trust, arguably asserting authority and influence in a very direct way. By contrast, George was not a founder, he joined NMAT as an existing organisation, and analysis suggests he sought to influence and shape in a less direct way. An important feature of leadership in NMAT was also the close working relationship with Harry, the Director of Education, with the two frequently working, as the network analysis showed, as a dyad.

Comparing George and Hughes' case thus further illustrates the contingent nature of the way roles were enacted. History, both organisational and personal, was important in both cases, and so too were the ways in which the two CEOs themselves acted, reflective of arguably both personal style and professional values. Individual agency is both significant, variable in the way it is enacted, and constrained and enabled by context.

### **Some Implications and Reflections for NMAT as an Organisation**

Conceiving of leadership as plural and relational, and exploring its enactment in the executive leadership space, suggests some considerations at an organisational level in the context of NMAT.

#### ***NMAT as an Organisation: Merger and Integration***

The idea of collaboration was very strongly held by headteachers and the central trust team. Baxter and Floyd (2019) treat a MAT as a collaborative organisation. I argued, however, that awareness of hierarchical roles conditions and modifies the way the frames of collaboration and autonomy are taken up, suggesting that applying Baxter and Floyd's conception to NMAT would mean missing decisive elements of the enactment of practices and emergence of patterns.

Conceiving of NMAT as a merger, following Greany and Higham (Greany & Higham, 2018), arguably more fully accounts for the practices and patterns of relationships

observed. Chreim's (2015) account of an acquisition and merger highlighted ambiguities and paradox experienced in the executive leadership space and consequent reconstituting of boundaries and challenges to identities, features also observed in NMAT. Conceiving of NMAT as a merger is instructive, therefore, and takes account of the interplay between hierarchical structures and collaborative and autonomous mindsets.

Greany and McGinity (2021) reviewed data from a study of MATs in the light of wider literature on Mergers and Acquisitions (M&A) and Post Merger Integration (PMI). A notable point they highlighted from the literature is that PMI in other sectors is invariably a multi-stage process, continuing over years. They also found from their data that MATs they studied were grappling with the integration of schools and sharing professional knowledge.

The themes highlighted were evident in the case of NMAT. For example, shifting patterns of relationships in the executive space were occurring in NMAT even when there was not a merger in progress. One cue, in sensemaking terms, for the shifting patterns was CEO George joining the organisation. Gronn (2015) asks 'What is the duration of a Merger and Acquisition?', noting the persistence of ambiguity and uncertainty in roles and relationships after the formation of a new organisation. In NMAT, this account suggests that ambiguity and uncertainty continue to arise in response to changes in the external environment, or from within the existing patterns of relationships. The finding aligns with the review by Greany and McGinity, and provides a case study with detailed insights into the continuing processes.

### ***NMAT as an Organisation: Leadership, Merger and Integration***

This study has considered leadership as plural and other recent studies have also recognised that leadership extends beyond the individual role of an executive leader whilst exploring the characteristics of MATs.

The analysis exemplified the point that the precise way in which a group of schools like NMAT emerged depended on the history of local relationships between schools and with the LA, the context of a school, and the agency of local actors (Greany & Higham, 2018). A study by the National Governance Association (NGA) (National Governance Association, 2021) investigated the nature of central, executive teams in MATS. They identified themes that relate to the findings from NMAT:

Even in trusts which had not grown recently, and did not plan growth in the near future, their central teams are still in a process of ongoing refinement. (ibid. pg. 12)

Noting a perceived lack of models for such organisations, they describe the process as ‘navigating in the dark’ and ‘making it up as they go along’ (ibid. pg. 12).

The discussion of NMAT offers a detailed picture of the response in NMAT. The ‘navigation’ and ‘making it up’ are seen to be sensemaking processes in the case of NMAT. Leaders’ responses are not arbitrary; they are establishing new practices whilst drawing on existing frames to navigate new situations. I have described this as bricolage. The NGA study’s point that emergent organisations are unique and, to some extent, novel, with few blueprints, models or reference points, is an important one, however. The case shows how the navigation is taking place in the context of NMAT.

In two other studies, leadership between and beyond schools is conceived of as a form of system leadership. Courtney and McGinity (2022) report the case of the establishment of a single MAT. They emphasise the plural nature of the leadership whilst recognising the particular significance of some individuals, the CEO especially. From a critical perspective, their analysis places considerable emphasis on the wider environment, structures, and figurations of power that constrain actors, minimising the extent to which individual agency might establish enduring patterns, albeit recognising individuals’ decisive role at a particular time. They argue that the formal structure of the MAT persists in a way that the specific enactment at a moment in

time does not.

The evidence from NMAT is of the importance of individuals' responses, interacting with formal structures and the wider environment. The taken-for-granted frames of thinking have been highlighted throughout the discussion, making clear their constraining effect. In NMAT, nevertheless, the interplay of interactions between formally designated leaders, the headteachers, and all the people with whom they interact, make the expression of ideas of hierarchy, collaboration and autonomy contextually specific; histories and established patterns of behaviour were very influential, literally visible in some of the sub-groups in the networks. I have shown that the consequences of deliberate and concerted actions initiated by formal leaders are not uniform, result in multiple senses and continuing interdependence strongly rooted in what has gone before.

Courtney and McGinity's analysis highlights the importance of wider governance, structures and widely held discourses, all unquestionably mirrored in the case of NMAT. The empirical approach of this study offered evidence of the resilience and persistence of patterns of interaction in NMAT and that the emergent patterns are, in part, consequences of multiple individuals' enacted personal and professional values, features arguably underplayed in Courtney and McGinity's analysis.

Constantinides (2021) also considers executive leadership as a form of system leadership which is 'multivoiced, heterogeneous and plural' (ibid pg. 10). His study

Explore(d) roles and practices of executive leaders ... and perceived impact on schools' improvements processes conditions and culture. (ibid.)

Focusing on similar domains of practice to the case study of NMAT, Constantinides identifies four domains of practice he associates with the practices of executive leaders: setting strategic directions; developing people and organisational capacity; establishing organisational infrastructure to support schools' improvement; and

providing instructional guidance. These relate closely to the domains of practice identified in NMAT.

He suggests that the patterns of relationships and connections between them and practices were 'difficult to unfold'.

The provisional understanding emerging from the study is that MATs are teeming with complexity, uncertainty and interdependence that make particularly important the role of executive leadership. (ibid. pg. 12)

He further suggested there was a need to explore how:

leaders' individual values, experience and perspectives interact with all elements of the ecosystem and how the activities in which system leaders participate, reciprocally affect and are affected by the changes that occur from participation in these activities. (ibid. pg. 13)

The analysis of NMAT complements and extends the findings from Constantinides' study. In the network analysis of NMAT, the patterning of relationships has been 'unfolded' and the complex flow of enactment illustrated. I have also argued that, in terms of educational improvement, leaders are drawing on their existing knowledge and widespread practice, a point reinforced by the similarity of the domains identified to those of Constantinides.

These reflections show the relevance of the analysis and discussion of the data from the case of NMAT. They show how analysing the complex context of the trust central team's actions, allows the interplay of the wider environment, local context and individual and collective agency in interactions to be discerned, and show what the triggers and cues for ongoing refinement of roles and teams might be. The NMAT case complements and extends other studies of MATs, by illustrating the way in which individuals' agency is influential, and also by 'unfolding' and characterising the complexity of the patterning of relationships.

# Chapter 7: Conclusion

Two broad research questions have guided the research described in this thesis:

1. How does an Executive Leader seek to bring about educational improvement in a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT)?
2. What patterns of leadership relations emerge beyond individual schools in a MAT?

This concluding chapter brings together the key findings and conclusions, highlights important insights and significant contributions, and also notes the limitations of the study.

## **7.1 How does an Executive Leader Seek to Bring About Educational Improvement in a MAT?**

The question of how the Executive Leader in NMAT, CEO George, sought to bring about educational improvement was approached through inquiring after practices he sought to enact, and into the frames, narrative and identities on which he drew. Conceptualising leadership as plural and relational meant understanding that George was not the only, or necessarily the most, significant source of influence. He was embedded in networks of relationships, part of the flow of interaction and relating that constituted the organisation. His actions have been understood and contextualised in relation to that flow and the wider complex environment.

George communicated indirectly with everyone in the trust and a wide external audience, and interacted directly in some way with large numbers of people. In terms of enacting his role in relation to improvement, he perceived himself to be embedded in a network of 28 people, his egocentric network. From the 28, he identified 14 people as the 'key people' to whom he related within the trust. The Core Network, as the 14 have been referred to, was conceived of as the main executive leadership space in and through which he acted in the trust, and was the focus of investigation.

George considered making NMAT ‘a more cohesive group of schools’ a primary purpose and goal of his role. Acting more cohesively was, he said, a ‘school improvement opportunity’. This was an instrumental rationale, and a proposed means of achieving the educational purposes of the trust. The goal was relevant to the way the schools in the trust worked together and extended to planning to work with other groups of schools.

The leadership practices described by members of the Core Network, including George, were: visioning; goal setting and planning; leadership for learning; people and culture; governance, evaluation and reviewing; changing designing and managing; boundary spanning and defining. Referred to in some way by all participants, they were taken-for-granted ideas about relevant practices. Described widely in the educational leadership literature, they were ‘the resources to hand’ for both headteachers and George and the central team in terms of guiding what they were doing.

All leaders took a broad view of the values and purposes of education and schools, with frames summarised as Realising potential, Preparation for the future and life chances, and Equity. Frames relating to the operation of schools were: Standards and accountability; Use of evidence and research; Centrality of teaching and pedagogy; and External reference points and review.

A further set of frames on which all participants drew related to the nature of NMAT as an organisation and the schools within the trust. These were: NMAT as a single legal hierarchical organisation; NMAT as a collaborative organisation; headteachers and individual schools as autonomous organisations with a high degree of discretion over decisions; and Efficiency and Resources.

An important aspect of the way George enacted his role was that he chose actions

or pursued initiatives for their symbolic significance. He expressed this as ‘choosing which battles to fight’, which, although expressed in terms of exercising authority, was not seeking conflict or direct compliance. The phrase alludes to choosing actions’ potential to communicate or enact a different reality. Acting in this way I characterised as sensegiving.

Sensegiving was enacted by George with the central team and especially with Director of Education Harry. In addition to selecting particular practices and activities, actions included promoting particular social interactions, selecting and highlighting particular cues as rationales for activities and highlighting particular meanings. Other symbolic actions involved some direct exercise of hierarchical authority.

CEO George and other members of the central trust team sought, through sensegiving activities, to shape and influence what the others took for granted and the roles and identities of individuals and institutions that made up NMAT, seeking to change or establish new norms of how schools worked, and also addressing the principles underlying and regulating them. George and the central team are able to initiate and orchestrate the activities described largely as a consequence of their hierarchical position, an expression of power in the sense of constraining what others do.

George and the team can be seen as bricoleurs, drawing on familiar leadership practices, the resources to hand, and enacting them in the new context of the executive leadership space. Reconstituting and creating new patterns of organisation was a feature of the activities they initiated, and involved redefining, reshaping and working across boundaries. George’s influence on the central team was both through direct interaction and a closely shared relationship with Director of Education Harry.

Distinctive features of acting in the executive leadership space were selecting

symbolically significant priorities and actions, sensegiving, and the practices of changing and designing an organisation and defining and spanning boundaries. These were thus distinctive elements of the way the CEO role was enacted.

George sought to achieve the goals he described in a relatively indirect way. His approach arose partly because of the history and context of NMAT. He joined an existing organisation with established patterns of communication and interaction. His approach was also a consequence of his construction of the role, his assessment and judgement of how to influence others in relation to the stated goals, and an expression of his personal and professional values.

## **7.2 What Patterns of Leadership Relations Emerge Beyond Individual Schools in a MAT?**

George's actions seeking to bring about educational improvement cannot be seen or understood in isolation from the complex networks of relationships and flow of interaction and relating that constitute the organisation. Understanding the patterns of leadership relationships was approached through inquiring into patterns in the enactment of practices alongside the qualitative data about frames, narratives and identities on which participants drew. The consensus views of the interconnections in the Core Networks were derived from the perceptions of the individuals involved in the patterns of relationships that relate to executive leadership. The networks visualise participants' collective perception of the executive leadership space (Figs 6 and 7 in Chapter 5).

Individuals experience constantly shifting interactions, patterned differently for different types of interactions, and for different practices. An individual's egocentric networks represent their perception of the patterns of interaction that recur and persist over time, in this study, for two types of interactions, instrumental and expressive. The consensus view of the instrumental and expressive Core Networks

shows, for the patterns that recur and persist, where individuals' perceptions substantially overlap. No one person's perception was exactly the same as the consensus view.

Participants' reasons for selecting particular interactions were different for different types of interaction. Instrumental interactions were generally selected on the basis of how important they were considered to be for developing, implementing and enacting plans for improvement. Expressive interactions were selected based on the qualities of relationships. They were generally trusting relationships, usually based on confidence in professional insights, but also where trust was high, irrespective of educational experience. The majority of Core Members' expressive interactions took place outside the Core Network.

The specific patterns and structure in the consensus views of the Core Networks are significant, therefore, as they make clear the perceived patterns of influencing relationships as practices are enacted, and can be seen as the emergent consequence of a history of such interactions.

The instrumental network revealed the centrality of George and Director of Education Harry, individually and as a dyad. They were each connected to more of the network members than anyone else. Secondary and primary headteachers were clustered separately. There were connections within the headteacher groups and with members of the central team, but not between the two groups of headteachers. There were sub-groups (cliques) within the patterns described. In the instrumental network all cliques involved George, mostly Harry and some other members of the central staff and trustees.

The expressive network showed similarities with the instrumental network. Primary and secondary headteachers were clustered separately, and Harry and George were

again connected to more of the network than anyone else. Notable differences were that the network was less densely connected, with Harry slightly more connected than George and the most central figure in the expressive networks. The sub-groups were slightly smaller, and amongst the primary headteachers there were cliques that did not include any central staff.

The relationship between George and his Director of Education Harry was a 'dyad', in which they acted with mutual understanding and intent, or 'pooled leadership' (Denis, Langley & Sergi, 2012). The central team were carrying out many activities characterised as symbolically enacting the organisational identity, acting with common understanding of their intent, acting with 'shared leadership' (ibid.). The Core Networks can be seen as a 'multi-party' group of central staff, trustees and headteachers, with the sub-groups described within the network. The interplay of the conceptions of hierarchy, autonomy and collaboration was a feature of every interaction and influenced the patterns that emerged. There was no simple or consistent relationship, however, between the patterns that emerged, the frames of hierarchy, autonomy and collaboration, and leadership practices.

The evidence was that the external environment and the history of organisations in NMAT were important factors in individuals' responses to events and interactions. Histories and established patterns of behaviour were literally visible in some of the sub-groups in the networks, meaning interactions between central staff, headteachers, and all the people with whom they interact were contextually specific. The unique combinations of individual and organisational histories, context, individual agency, interplay of external influences and the balance of hierarchy, collaboration and autonomy help explain why the emergent patterns of interaction do not show simple or direct relationships with the features described.

The diverse combinations of interactions in the Core Networks are well characterised by Gronn's description of a hybrid configuration (Gronn, 2009). The configurations

are in constant flux, however, and Gronn's notion of hybrid combinations, whilst relevant, is not sufficient to capture the dynamism of the flow of interaction and relating. I propose, therefore, thinking in terms of a 'flow of enactment' rather than simply a configuration of relationships.

Simply thinking of a configuration is insufficient because relations between people are multiplex. Multiple types of relationships exist between the same people and different sets of patterns, or configurations, exist simultaneously for different types of interaction. Thinking of a single configuration is insufficient because the patterns evident in the consensus views of the Core Networks vary between leadership practices, whilst from the perspective of individuals involved, patterns are different for different groups within networks for the same practice. As different practices are enacted, the patterns change, and they change when different types of interaction take place. A configuration is one, shifting, element of the flow.

The ingredients of a flow of enactment are thus the different types of interaction, the perceived configuration of relationships for each type, the balance of the frames of hierarchy, autonomy and collaboration within each interaction, and the intent of the interactions in terms of leadership practices and underlying frames. The ingredients can be combined to characterise the unique enactments of leadership in a particular context.

### **7.3 Extended Insights**

Identities are central to how individuals understand their place individually and collectively, influencing the actions of executive leaders, headteachers and trustees alike. The identity of individual schools as institutions, of NMAT as an organisation, and individual professional identities, were evident in the case study. Activities orchestrated by the central team enacted the identity of NMAT as a single

organisation; nevertheless, multiple, interrelated and interdependent understandings, senses and identities emerged in the minds of headteachers and central staff. There was plural sensemaking, just as there was plural leadership.

Multiple senses emerged as a consequence of participants' experience of ambiguity and paradox, created in part by the selections involved in the sensegiving of the central team. Interdependent working between schools and the central trust nevertheless continued, enabled by overlapping understandings of shared frames and by the organisational structures and routines of NMAT.

Analysis of the flow of enactment offers insights into organising in NMAT. Ambiguity and uncertainty in relation to leadership roles and identities throughout NMAT arose in response to a stream of cues and prompts from within and beyond the organisation, George's appointment as CEO being one such cue. The design and structuring of NMAT as an organisation was not a single event, but a continuing process of multi-stage change over extended periods of time, an insight that aligns with those from the literature on Post Merger Integration in other sectors (Greany & McGinity, 2021).

## **7.4 Contributions**

This study, adding to the small but growing literature of empirical studies of MATs, makes some distinctive contributions. It offers an account of executive leadership in the context of a MAT, showing its plural, situated nature, and highlights some distinguishing features.

A significant conceptual contribution is extending Gronn's idea of hybrid leadership with the idea of flows of enactment. Configurations of leadership relationships become an ingredient in the characterisation of plural leadership, with the ingredients of the flow better capturing the complex, dynamic nature of enacting leadership.

The use of Social Network Analysis in this context is novel. Cognitive Social Structure data reveals socially constructed networks of relationships on which leaders act, making explicit the diverse, shifting groupings of leadership relationships that coexist.

Combining sensemaking with network data is a further distinctive aspect of this study, offering a relatively rare, empirically grounded account of sensemaking processes in the context of educational leadership. The case extends discussions of sensemaking by exploring how power and hierarchy influence the sensemaking process, by showing in this context sensemaking as an ongoing process rather than a response to a single large stimulus, and by demonstrating that multiple 'senses' emerge, suggesting plural sensemaking, linked to plural leadership.

A complexity perspective has underpinned this study. The empirical work and subsequent analysis is a contribution in that there are very few empirical pieces on leadership in education with a complexity perspective. The findings and analysis exemplify and illustrate the experience of complexity from the perspective of individuals and their interactions.

Concepts like systemic effects and emergent patterns were made specific by elaborating the hybrid nature of the patterns of relationships which analysis showed were dynamic and shifting. Analysis of flows of enactment showed as types of interaction changed, or practices in which leaders were engaged shifted, then so too did the specific patterns in the networks, the content of interactions and the balance of hierarchy, autonomy and collaboration. The specific characterisations of flows give concrete expression to the experience of complexity in this context.

The analysis also showed how the selections of one group, the central team, in simplifying complexity by seeking to reduce and clarify choices, paradoxically lead to

ambiguity and complexity for others, challenging identities and boundaries. Increasing complexity by making selections and attempting to reduce it has been observed by others (Ramussen, 2010; Biesta, 2010); the contribution of this study is to exemplify the effect empirically.

Social Network Analysis (SNA) added significant dimensions to the discussion of the patterns of leadership, capturing perceptions of the specific patterning of interactions and adding a unique element to the empirical analysis of sensemaking and leadership.

The study makes a methodological contribution. There is a growing literature using SNA to study leadership within schools and collaboration between schools (Moolenaar, Slegers & Daly, 2012; Daly, 2010b; de Lima, 2008). Using an ego network as the defining network to take a Cognitive Social Structures approach is novel both in SNA more generally, but also in the context of schools and leadership. It has allowed a nuanced, specific discussion of the social construction of leadership relations by participants.

There was scope for investigating other features of the networks that were not pursued, as they were not so relevant to the focus of this study. For example, the composition of the networks, attributes of individuals and further exploration of the extensive networks beyond the Core Network. There is, however, an aspect of the findings that is of particular note.

The finding that expressive networks – which have an influence on the enactment of practices – emerge for a range of reasons, not necessarily related to professional expertise or position, has an implication for organisational learning, culture, and networks. Promotion of networks for learning and professional development or developing organisational culture do not ordinarily recognise that, for network members, the trusting relationships sought out may not be in the professional context

and may even be preferred by those involved.

## 7.5 Limitations

Studying a single MAT, with data gathered over a short period of time, and a focus on particular features of leaders and practices, means there are necessarily a number of limitations to this study.

No direct comparison with other MATs is possible in terms of the data gathered. Analysis of the data and findings are contextually specific, by design, and thus are not directly generalisable to other contexts. The analysis and findings are nevertheless characterised in terms that mean concepts and an analytical understanding of processes can be applied in other contexts. There is what Byrne (2013) refers to as the logic of similarity. It would be reasonable to explore cases that share characteristics with this case using the same approach and testing analytically derived concepts. There is transferability.

Selections made in developing the study included focusing on educational activity. There is thus a limit to the scope of the findings. Data was not gathered directly about more general organisational practices or strategies, for example. The small scale of the study, with limited resources, also means the volume of data and range of interviewees was constrained. An extension would be to explore a wider group of participants from across the trust and some of the named contacts outside the trust.

A further limit to the scope of the context was that the patterns and perceptions described are the perceptions and constructions of the participants. Whilst indications and inferences may be made about, for example, the impact and influence of executive leaders and headteachers on schools, there is no interview data from that wider group of staff.

Data was collected between May and July of 2019, meaning the perspectives were the perceptions of the participants at that point in time. Emergence and related complexity concepts are predicated on the idea of change over time. The lack of longitudinal data was mitigated to some extent by collecting qualitative data and narratives about change and differences over time. Such accounts were indirect and based on perceptions and recollections of participants, limiting the scope of the context to which the findings directly relate.

To summarise, the findings, analysis and discussion of this case are based on empirical data from a single context, that of NMAT, with a focus on one, albeit broad, domain of leadership practices, educational improvement, at a particular moment in time. These considerations delimit the boundaries of direct applicability. The analytic and conceptual reflections mean, however, that findings and conclusions can be transferred and used to reflect on comparable cases without making the claim that the specific findings are more widely generalisable.

Two further observations are relevant. The limitations imposed by considering a single case are, in part, precisely what make it of value. The processes and specific context that are investigated mean it is possible to gain insight into how the unique features of this case emerge in response to the wider environment, and it is those insights I am arguing that are transferable. Secondly, the limitations within the exploration of the case – the focus on a particular domain at a moment in time, for example – also indicate the potential for extending and deepening the investigation. For example, even retaining the focus on a single domain of practice but extending the investigation over a period of time would add considerable insights and scope for investigation of the evolution and emergence of patterns. Extending the direct collection of data beyond the immediate egocentric network of the CEO would also permit a wider exploration of patterns of leadership and its plural, hybrid nature in NMAT.

## **Final Remarks**

This research began with the desire to understand the response of educational leaders to complexity in novel situations where there were no blueprints or guidebooks. Bringing about educational improvement in a Multi-Academy Trust was just such a context.

In Neighbourhood Multi-Academy Trust, I found teeming complexity, to borrow a phrase from Constantinides (2021), in a context that was apparently similar to many others. Executive leaders were continually adjusting, not making it up, but making sense. They were always facing new situations, the new and novel emerging from a bricolage of the existing. Exploring the case of NMAT has provided findings and concepts that can be applied productively to make sense in other settings.

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# Appendix 1: Invitations to Participate, Information Sheets, Consent Forms

## Appendix 1a: Text of Emails - Initial approach

Email 1

Dear [Name of CEO]

I hope you don't mind this unsolicited approach. I'm contacting you to ask if you might consider participating in a research project into executive leadership. I am seeking to do a case study with a MAT of the size of [name of trust] and with the mix of phases you have in the trust.

There is a very brief overview note of the project below. I'm working towards an EdD with the Institute of Education (IoE), University College London. This study is the final project for my thesis. As I've indicated, this email is to enquire if you might consider participating.

If you think you may be interested, I will of course send you more information so that you can consider it more fully before deciding.

Thank you for your time considering this. If you don't wish to participate at this time, I'd be very grateful if you felt able to suggest another CEO and trust who you think may be interested.

Kind Regards

Mike Collins

IoE, University College London

mob: xxxxxxxxxxxx

### Brief Overview of Research Project

The focus of the research is on executive leadership in a Multi-Academy Trust, in particular the leadership of educational improvement. I plan to do this through a case study in a multi-academy trust, which will involve interviews with both the CEO and others who contribute to the executive leadership of the MAT, exploring both who

they work with and how.

The information will be used for my doctoral thesis, and may be presented as part of reports and findings of the research at conferences and in publications. All data presented in this way will be anonymised and the location and identity of schools will be protected.

Email 2 and information sheet (Appendix 1b) attached

Dear [Name],

Thankyou for the response and I'm really pleased you're interested.

I'm attaching an information sheet so that you have as much information as possible at this stage. I wanted also to highlight that the plan for the case study involves conversations with yourself initially and then interviews with others in the trust as well (they would be a single interview with each person hopefully). Precisely who depends on our conversation.

I'm of course happy to clarify anything and to speak if that would be helpful.

If having reviewed the information and the rough plan you are still happy to proceed, let me know, and the next step would be to arrange an initial conversation.

I'll look forward to hearing from you,

Regards

Mike

## Appendix 1b: Information Sheets

# Information Form - CEOs

## Executive Leaders and Educational Leadership in English Multi-Academy Trusts

April - July 2019

My name is Mike Collins and I am inviting you to take part in my research project, 'Executive Leaders and Educational Leadership in English Multi-Academy Trusts'.

I am working towards a Doctorate in Education (EdD) with the UCL, Institute of Education (IoE) in London, and this project is the final stage of the research towards my thesis. I have worked in the education sector for 35 years and am studying alongside and independently of my full-time work.

I am hoping to understand and explain how leadership for educational improvement is exercised in a MAT by leaders in executive roles, and how they respond to and deal with the current complex context in England.

I very much hope that you would like to take part. This information sheet will try and answer any questions you might have about the project, but please don't hesitate to contact me if there is anything else you would like to know.

### What the research is about

The research project is on executive leadership in a Multi-Academy Trust, in particular how leaders seek to secure educational improvement.

I plan to do this through a case study of this work in a multi-academy trust, which will involve interviews with both the CEO and others who contribute to the executive leadership of the MAT. The focus is on the leadership and organisation beyond individual schools in the MAT that contributes to this aim. The key questions are, therefore:

1. How does an Executive Leader seek to bring about educational improvement in a MAT?
2. What are the patterns of leadership relationships beyond individual schools in the MAT?

The research will explore what practices and activities there are, and what frameworks and ideas are used to guide what leaders do.

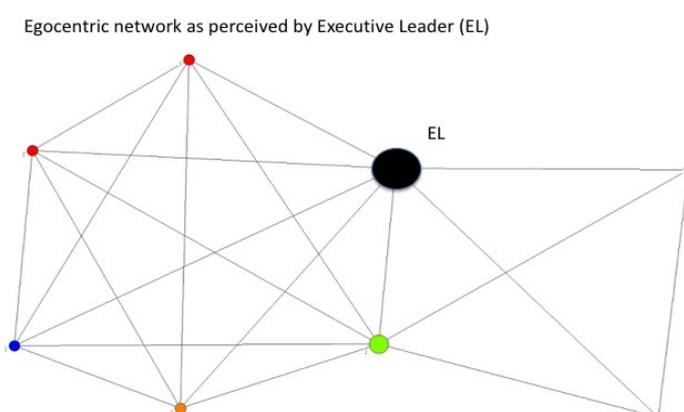
### Why am I being invited to take part and what will happen if I choose to take part?

As CEO, your role is central to the MAT and this research.

If you take part, we will have a conversation in three parts. The overall purpose is to understand how you see your role and the part you play in educational improvement in the MAT. This is likely to require two interviews. One of 1 hour or less, and then a slightly longer

one.

The first part of the conversation is introductory and would be the shorter interview. The second part explores who you work with on educational improvement in your role. I will ask you about interactions you may have for different purposes, and to name the people who are directly involved. As these questions do involve naming individual people and giving some information about them it is important to state that this is completely confidential. When the information is analysed, individuals will be given a unique numerical code and, if referred to in a report, the code or a pseudonym will be used to preserve their anonymity. This data will allow the construction of a 'personal social network' related to leadership. It may look something like this:



Finally, we'll discuss how you see the overall approach to educational improvement in the MAT, talk about some specific examples and what roles different people play.

Will anyone know I have been involved?

Your participation is completely confidential and steps will be taken to ensure that it remains so. References to the MAT, schools or any other detail that may either indicate the location or the actual identity of the organisation will either be removed or pseudonymised to protect your privacy and identity. I will not disclose or indicate to anyone, including University staff, in the course of conducting this research where the MAT is or who I am working with.

What will happen to the results of the research?

I will analyse the data generated. It will be stored securely and in accordance with UCL policies and names of individuals and organisations will be coded or pseudonymised prior to analysis. The results and analysis will form part of my doctoral thesis and may also be presented at research conferences and seminars or in published papers.

If you wish, you may also have a copy of the outline and a summary of main findings when these are available.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is completely voluntary. It is entirely up to you whether or not you choose to take part. I hope that if you do choose to be involved then you will find it a valuable experience.

If you do decide to take part and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any point with no questions asked and to request that your data is not used.

#### Data Protection Privacy Notice

The data controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Office provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk). UCL's Data Protection Officer can also be contacted at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk).

Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found here:

[www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/participants-health-and-care-research-privacy-notice](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/participants-health-and-care-research-privacy-notice)

The legal basis that would be used to process your personal data will be performance of a task in the public interest. The legal basis used to process special category personal data will be for scientific and historical research or statistical purposes/explicit consent.

Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. We will pseudonymise the personal data you provide, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk).

#### Contact for further information

If you have any further questions before you decide whether to take part, you can reach me at [xxxxx@xxxxx](mailto:xxxxx@xxxxx) or 07xxxxxxxx

If you would like to be involved, please complete the following consent form and return to me directly when I visit or on [xxxxx@xxxxx](mailto:xxxxx@xxxxx) by xxxxxxx

This project is currently being reviewed by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee (reference number).

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this information sheet

# Information Form - Alters

## Executive Leaders and Educational Leadership in English Multi-Academy Trusts

April - July 2019

My name is Mike Collins and I am inviting you to take in part in my research project, 'Executive Leaders and Educational Leadership in English Multi-Academy Trusts'.

I am working towards a Doctorate in Education (EdD) with the UCL, Institute of Education (IoE) in London, and this project is the final stage of the research towards my thesis. I have worked in the education sector for 35 years and am studying alongside and independently of my full time work.

I am hoping to understand and explain how leadership for educational improvement is exercised in a MAT by leaders in executive roles, and how they respond to and deal with the current complex current context in England.

I very much hope that you would like to take part. This information sheet will try and answer any questions you might have about the project, but please don't hesitate to contact me if there is anything else you would like to know.

### What the research is about

The research project is on executive leadership in a Multi-Academy Trust, in particular how leaders seek to secure educational improvement. I plan to do this through a case study of this work in a multi-academy trust, which will involve interviews with both the CEO and others who contribute to the executive leadership of the MAT. The focus is on the leadership and organisation beyond individual schools in the MAT that contributes to this aim. The key questions are therefore:

1. How does an Executive Leader seek to bring about educational improvement in a MAT?
2. What are the patterns of leadership relationships beyond individual schools in the MAT?

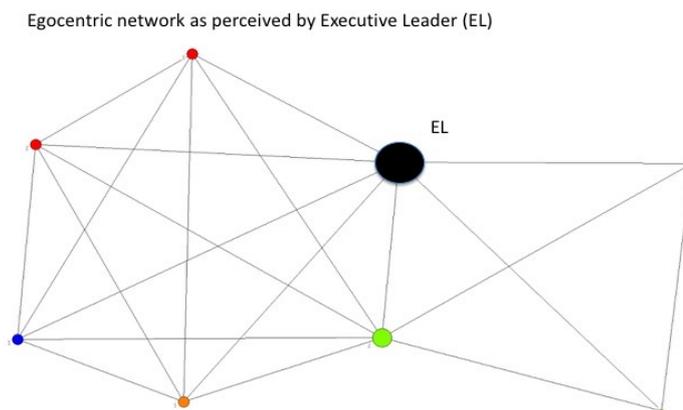
The research will explore what practices and activities there are, and what frameworks and ideas are used to guide what leaders do.

### Why am I being invited to take part and what will happen if I choose to take part?

Following interviews with xxxxx (MAT CEO), they identified you as someone who may be able to contribute to this research. Participation is entirely voluntary and confidential however (see more below).

If you do take part, we will have a conversation in three parts. The overall purpose is understand how you see your role and the part you play in educational improvement in the MAT. This is likely to require a single interview lasting around 90 minutes.

The first part of the conversation is introductory, the second part explores who you work with on educational improvement in your role. I will ask you about interactions you may have for different purposes, and to name the people who are directly involved. As these questions do involve naming individual people and giving some information about them it is important to state that this is completely confidential. When the information is analysed, individuals will be given a unique numerical code and, if referred to in a report, the code or a pseudonym will be used to preserve their anonymity. This data will allow the construction of a 'personal social network' related to leadership. It may look something like this:



Although the CEO nominated you as someone who could contribute, your responses to these questions will not be shared nor visualisations like these shared, even in anonymised form with anyone in the organisation other than yourself.

Finally, we'll discuss how you see the overall approach to educational improvement in the MAT, talk about some specific examples and what roles different people play.

Will anyone know I have been involved?

Your MAT CEO has suggested you as a potential participant in this research so will know of this invitation. Your participation is confidential however, and steps will be taken to ensure that it remains so. Your decision whether to participate or not will not be shared with anyone. It is possible in an organisation such as a MAT that others will be aware if an interview takes place. Your data and responses will be anonymised however, and if responses are used in a report, care will be taken with attribution to minimise the possibility of identification.

References to the MAT, schools or any other detail that may either indicate the location or the actual identity of the organisation will either be removed or pseudonymised to protect your privacy and identity.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is completely voluntary. It is entirely up to you whether or not you choose to take

part. I hope that if you do choose to be involved then you will find it a valuable experience. If you do decide to take part and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any point with no questions asked and to request that your data is not used.

### Data Protection Privacy Notice

The data controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Office provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk). UCL's Data Protection Officer can also be contacted at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk).

Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found here:

[www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/participants-health-and-care-research-privacy-notice](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/participants-health-and-care-research-privacy-notice)

The legal basis that would be used to process your personal data will be performance of a task in the public interest. The legal basis used to process special category personal data will be for scientific and historical research or statistical purposes/explicit consent.

Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. Will pseudonymise the personal data you provide, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk).

### Contact for further information

If you have any further questions before you decide whether to take part, you can reach me at [xxx@xxx](mailto:xxx@xxx) or 07xxxxxxxx

If you would like to be involved, please complete the following consent form and return to me directly when I visit or on [xxx@xxx](mailto:xxx@xxx) by [date].

This project has been reviewed and approved by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee [reference number].

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this information sheet

## Appendix 1c: Consent Forms

### Institute of Education



# Executive Leaders and Educational Leadership in English Multi-Academy Trusts

April – July 2019

If you are happy to participate, please complete this consent form and return to [xxxx@xxxxx](mailto:xxxx@xxxxx)

1. I have read and understood the information about the research

2. I agree to be interviewed

3. I am happy for my interview to be video/audio recorded

4. I understand that if any of my words are used in reports or presentations they will not be attributed to me

5. I understand that I can withdraw from the project at any time and that if I choose to do this, any data I have contributed will not be used

6. I understand that I can contact Mike Collins at any time

7. I understand that the results will be shared with Mike Collins' colleagues at IoE and may be disseminated, without attribution, through conferences and publications

-----  
-----

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

-----  
-----

Researcher's name: Mike Collins

Signed \_\_Mike Collins

UCL Institute of Education

20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL

+44 (0)20 7612 6000 | enquiries@ioe.ac.uk | www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe

## Appendix 2: Interview Schedules

### Appendix 2a: Interview Schedule CEO Interviews

#### 1. Introductory Conversation with CEO

##### Preamble & Purpose of the interview

“The purpose of this initial meeting is introductory and intended to enable me (the researcher) to gain an understanding of the current context of the Multi-Academy Trust and its schools, supplementing information that is already available on the website and through publicly available data.

It is also an opportunity to discuss a briefly how the MAT has developed, the CEOs role and your (the CEO’s) own professional history that has led up to the current role

I will also introduce, referring to the information sheets, the research (and discuss briefly its main focus (educational improvement) and what that means to you)”. \*

\* This aspect of the discussion may be included in the second interview depending on how much time is available and initial responses to the invitation to participate (eg it may be that some documents or other information is shared by the MAT as part of the initial approach)

##### Questions and prompts

##### Theme 1: Organisational context and history

Assumed starting point - confirm the schools that are part of the trust, publicly available information about them (phase of education, size, location, last OfSTED judgment, performance data); Scheme of delegation may be on the website.

Intro Q1: Please describe the current organisation of the Multi Academy Trust.

Prompts: What role does the trust as an organisation beyond the school have in operational aspects of individual schools

What leadership roles are there that operate beyond the schools in the trust?

Intro Q2: Please give a brief account of how the group has developed to this point

Prompt: What do see as having influenced the development of the trust into the form

you describe?

## Theme 2: Role and professional history

Intro Q3: Please describe your role as you see it currently

Intro Q4: Has this changed in any way since you have been in post/ as the trust has changed?

Intro Q5: Please give a brief account of your own professional history, leading up to this role.

## Theme 3: Educational Improvement: Meaning and interpretation.

This research is focusing on educational practices. There may be activities and practices that take place in the trust and its schools that are not directly educational (although they will be related), for example maintaining buildings or administrative arrangements for employing and paying staff.

Intro Q6: How do you understand this term? What would you include as 'educational'?

The focus is in particular on educational improvement.

Intro Q7: What would you consider to be included in seeking educational improvement?

Prompts: What aspects of schools or the MAT's activities might be the focus?

If improvement is interpreted narrowly as schools' performance as measured by test results and performance tables measures

Prompts: What might have a bearing or influence on whether those aspects improve? Are there any other aspects of the school/ MAT activities that may be a focus.

## 2. Main Interview with CEO - Part One

### Preamble and Purpose

"The purpose of (this part of) the interview is to explore who you work with on educational improvement in your CEO role\*.

I will ask you about interactions you may have for different purposes, and to name the people who are directly involved. I'll also ask you to 'think aloud' as you name them, saying out loud your thought process and thinking".

There is no expectation about how many or how few people you name in response to each question".

\* If the idea of educational improvement was not discussed in the first interview, it will be discussed first in this interview

#### Questions and Prompts

These questions do involve naming individual people and giving some information about them. I'll reiterate at this point that this is confidential. When the information is analysed, individuals will be given a unique numerical code and if referred to a report, the code or a pseudonym will be used to preserve their anonymity.

You will be aware that the project plan involves asking those people to participate. Their consent will be required however and they will be free to decline. That information will also be kept confidential.

#### Name Generators

##### CEO Name Generator 1 - instrumental, 'operational'

Think about the people you work and interact with directly when you are putting into practice plans for educational improvement.

Please list the people with whom you've worked directly over the last year to bring about educational improvement in the MAT.

Think aloud, as you name people, about why you have named them

##### CEO Name Generator 2- Instrumental, strategic

Think about the people you work with to develop and make plans for educational improvement.

Please list the people with whom you've worked directly over the last year to develop and make plans for educational improvement in the MAT.

Think aloud, as you name people, about why you have chosen them

Don't worry if they are some of the same people.

##### CEO - Name Generator, Expressive Advice.

From time to time, most people may discuss their role or some aspect of it, informally with other people seek advice, people with whom they have a trusting relationship.

Please list the people from whom you've sought advice or discussed educational improvement informally.

Think Aloud

#### Name Interpreters

For each named alter, the following questions

Personal characteristics:

i. Full name, gender

ii Job Title/ Role in relation to MAT

iii Employer

iv Main organisational with which they are associated in relation to educational improvement activity (if different from iii)\*

\*This point captures

1. a. Voluntary roles associated with the MAT eg. Trustee
2. b. People employed by MAT but principally associated with an individual school within the MAT

Alter to Alter Perceptions

For each person named in response to the name generator questions ask, in relation to every other person named:

Does A work and interact directly with B when putting plans for educational improvement into practice?

Would A say they seek advice about educational improvement from B or discuss it informally?

### 3. Main Interview with CEO - Part 2

Preamble and Purpose

“The purpose of this part of the interview is gain an understanding of the overall approach to educational improvement in the MAT, to discuss some specific examples and to understand what roles different people play. The focus of interest is those strategies and activities that are organised beyond an individual schools (although they may involve and make a difference to individual schools). We will also talk about how this may have changed over time.

Questions and Prompts

Starting point, recap of discussion about educational improvement from Introductory Conversation (or CEO Interview Part 1 if it took place there)

Themes:

1. a. The framing of improving and ‘bracketing’ or selecting the practices

and tangible outcomes they seek to improve (may be expressed as goals (eg students' test results, attitudes and behaviours,) quality of activities ( eg.; the experience students have; what teachers do with students) or in terms of processes (eg developing staff, or 'assuring quality)

1. b. How they seek to bring about improvements (what practices are enacted)

CEO Part 2 Question 1: How would you describe the main elements of your approach to educational improvement.

Prompt: What aspects of the MATs activities are being focused on? How is this decided – what cues or indications are used focus attention?

CEO Part 2 Question 2: (Taking the cue from the initial response) Describe some of the specific activities that take place in relation to (named elements ) ? Could you give a specific example of how something related to (named element) is being taken forward?

Themes: What roles to individuals play?

What is the CEO role.

What other roles are there? How is this reflected in interactions/ patterns described?

CEO Part 2 Question 3: What is your (the CEO) role in each of these elements OR What role do you play in (named elements).

Prompts: Which elements or activities are you directly involved in? What specific contribution do you make?

CEO Part 2 Question 4: Who else is involved and what role do they play?

Using network map/ visualisation of personal network

Questions: What reflections does this (the network visualisation) prompt, on the how plans are put into practice and the roles of individuals.

Prompts: Are there individuals who play particularly significant roles (if so what?)

Themes: Why they do what they

The rationale for these things

What sorts of things influence / have influenced;

Some indication may have even given in previous questions as to the thinking or motivation for particular elements or approaches - this would be recognised at this point.

CEO Part 2 Question 5: Can you say more about why you have taken this approach?

Prompts: (Taking prompts from responses to questions CEO Part 2: 1 &2) How do you see 'elements mentioned' contributing to improvement.

What had led you to believe it is likely to be effective?

Themes: Has the MAT approach to improvement changed over time?

CEO Part 2 Question 6: Has your approach changed over time? (If so) In what way? What has prompted these changes?

Themes: (Revisit some themes from literature re school improvement/ sustainable improvement/ improvement at scale if not mentioned in discussion so far)

Choose from - Vision/ Values/ Culture; People, Learning Capacity; Assessment, Curriculum Pedagogy; Quality Assurance; Learning Organisation (governance, research etc, learning from experience')

Question: Are there any other aspects of your approach you would say are important that we haven't discussed, For example (name aspects eg: developing the curriculum and opportunities available to students and pupils in schools OR approaches to how the capability of staff is improved OR approaches to

## **Appendix 2b: Interview Schedule Alters**

### ***Interviews with Alters***

Preamble and Purposes

"This interview is three parts. It's overall purpose is understand how you see your role and the part you play in educational improvement in the MAT.

The first part is introductory and is an opportunity to discuss briefly how the MAT has developed, your role and your own professional history that has led up to the current role. I will also introduce, referring to the information sheets, the research (and discuss briefly its main focus (educational improvement) and what that means to you)".\*

The second part explores who you work with on educational improvement in your role. I will ask you about interactions you may have for different purposes, and to name the people who are directly involved.

Finally, we'll discuss how you see the overall approach to educational improvement in the MAT, talk about some specific examples and what roles different people play.

### Introductory section

#### Theme 1: Organisational context and history

Assumed starting point - awareness of interviewee that I have spoken to CEO, know something about trust.

Could you briefly describe the current organisation of the Multi Academy Trust as you see it and how the group has developed to this point?

Prompts: What role does the trust as an organisation beyond the school have in operational aspects of individual schools

What leadership roles are there that operate beyond the schools in the trust?

What do you do see as having influenced the development of the trust into the form you describe?

#### Theme 2: Role and professional history

Please describe your role as you see it currently. Has this changed in any way since you have been in post/ as the trust has changed?

Please give a brief account of your own professional history, leading up to this role.

#### Theme 3: Educational Improvement: Meaning and interpretation.

This research is focussing on educational practices. There may be activities and practices that take place in the trust and its schools that are not directly educational (although they will be related), for example maintaining buildings or administrative arrangements for employing and paying staff. How do you understand this term? What would you include as 'educational'?

The focus is in particular on educational improvement.

What would you consider that to mean?

What sort of things might be changing? What might have a bearing or influence on whether they change.

### Name Generators

These questions do involve naming individual people and giving some information about them. I'll reiterate at this point that this is completely confidential. When the information is analysed, individuals will be given a unique numerical code and if referred to a report, the code or a pseudonym will be used to preserve their anonymity.

#### Name generator - Instrumental

Think about the people you work and interact with directly when you are putting into practice plans for educational improvement.

Please list the people with whom you've worked directly over the last year to bring about educational improvement in the MAT.

Think aloud, as you name people, about why you have named them

#### Name Generator Expressive - Advice

From time to time, most people may discuss their role or some aspect of it, informally with other people and seek advice, people with whom they have a trusting relationship.

Please list the people from whom you've sought advice or discussed educational improvement informally.

Think Aloud

### Alter to Alter perceptions

For alters in CEO networks who they have NOT named

Do you interact directly with x when you are putting into practice plans for educational improvement.

For each person named in response to the name generator questions, including additional alters from the CEO network, ask, in relation to every other person named:  
Does A work and interact directly with B when putting plans for educational improvement into practice?

Would A say they seek advice about educational improvement from B?

### Improvement questions

Themes: What do they seek to improve; How they seek to bring about improvements  
(what practices are enacted)

Question: How would you describe the main elements of your approach to educational improvement

Prompt: What are there efforts to improve? How is this decided?

Question: (Taking the cue from the initial response) Describe some of the specific activities that take place in relation to (named elements) ? Could you give a specific example of how something related to (named element) is being taken forward?

Themes: What roles to individuals play?

What is the their role.

What other roles are there? How is this reflected in interactions/  
patterns described?

Question: What is your role in each of the these elements OR What role do you play in (named elements).

Prompts: Which elements or activities are you directly involved in? What specific contribution do you make?

Question: Who else is involved and what role do they play?

Using network map/ visualisation of personal network

Questions: What reflections does this (the network visualisation) prompt, on the how plans are put into practice and the roles of individuals.

Themes: The rationale for these things

What sorts of things influence / have influenced;

Some indication may have even given in previous questions as to the thinking or motivation for particular elements or approaches - this would be recognised at this point.

Question: Can you say more about why this approach this taken and why it is effective?

Prompts: What had led you to believe it is effective

Themes: Has it changed over time?

Question: Are you aware of this changing over time? (If so) In what way?  
What has prompted these changes?

## Appendix 3: Network Analysis, technical detail and results

### **Appendix 3a. Construction of core networks using a threshold function**

CSS, aggregations and consensus Structures

Krackhardt (1987) discussed approaches to aggregating the multiple matrices generated by the Cognitive Social Structures approach of recording the perceptions of every member of a network of the whole structure. Aggregating would create a single adjacency matrix which represents in some way a combined or shared perception of the network by the actors, of the social structure of which they are a part.

- i. Self Reports/ Locally Aggregated Structures: One approach is to decide whether a tie exists in the aggregated structure, based on the reports of those directly involved in the interaction. The choice is to include a tie if either of the actors says it exists (the union rule), or alternatively to include it only if both say it exists (the intersection rule). (Krackhardt, 1987 pg.116)
- ii. Consensus Structures: A second approach is to use all of the responses of actors in the network and to use a rule to decide if a tie exists, for example, if the majority believe the tie to exist. Krackhardt refers to this as a threshold function (ibid, pg.117).

Consensus structures, missing data and calculating threshold functions

11 of the 15 members of the Core Network in this research provided data, meaning for 4 members only the perceptions of others of their ties were available. Neal (2009) proposes, in these circumstances, using the consensus approach to construct the portion of the network for which there is missing data. The first step in this approach is to determine the value of the threshold function, that is the number of people who

have to identify a tie as existing for it to be included in the aggregated network. Neal, following an extending Krackhardt, suggests three ways of determining the threshold:

- i. A simple majority of actors say it exists
- ii. An average number of responses per tie across the whole network, in other words, = (Total number of responses identifying a tie)/ The total number of ties)
- iii. Using a Binomial function, calculate the critical number of responses for which the probability of a tie being identified is significantly greater than simply being random, based on the underlying probability of a tie being identified for that network. Underlying probability is calculated from the number of ties identified so is specific to the responses in relation to a particular network.

The approach taken to determine a threshold value for the specific networks in this study, was:

- apply all three of the approaches outlined by Neal for both the expressive and instrumental network.
- Generate a consensus network using each in turn
- Generate a network for the 11 participating members using their self-reports and applying the union rule
- Compare the section of each of the networks generated using the threshold function, with the self-report network, and use the threshold value that generates a network most closely matching the self-report network for the 11 participating members.

The approach is pragmatic and is presumed to generate a complete network that is close to the likely union rule Locally Aggregated Structure. The rationale for the union rule, is that in the context of this research it is the perception of the interaction existing that is significant, whether that is either or both participants.

Example: Determining Threshold for the Expressive Network.

Table 14 summarises the result of summing the nominations for each dyad from all 11 matrices. For example, 4 people considered there to be a tie between C3 (CEO George) and C3A2 (COO Ava who did not participate).

	C3	C3A1	C3A2	C3A3	C3A4	C3A5	C3A8	C3A9	C3A10	C3A11	C3A12	C3A13	C3A14	C3A15	C3A16	Total Nominations	
C3	0	6	4	4	5	3	3	3	2	2	4	7	5	1	0	Total Dyads Identified	217
C3A1		0	5	5	5	5	3	6	4	4	6	3	5	6	1	Total Possible Dyads in all matrices	60
C3A2			0	7	7	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	0	0	Average nominating a dyad	3.62
C3A3				0	7	0	0	0	1	0	4	0	3	0	0	Probability	0.19
C3A4					0	1	0	0	0	2	2	0	1	0	0	Binomial Threshold	4
C3A5						0	6	5	9	1	1	0	0	1	0		
C3A8							0	6	5	0	0	0	0	3	0		
C3A9								0	4	1	1	0	0	3	0		
C3A10									0	0	0	0	0	1	0		
C3A11										0	4	2	0	0	0		
C3A12											0	0	3	3	2		
C3A13												0	6	0	0		
C3A14													0	0	0		
C3A15														0	4		
C3A16															0		

Table 14: Expressive Network - Number of times each dyad nominated

Using the data in Table 14 shows the Average number of nominations was 3.62 for each dyad. The CRITBINOM function in Microsoft Excel was used to determine the threshold at which nominations were significantly greater than the underlying probability of a tie being nominated (Neal, 2009). These values are very close for this network (3.62 and 4). Using the threshold based on the majority of the network nominating would mean using 6 as the threshold.

Three networks were generated using these values with the software UCInet and were compared to a network generated using the Union rule for the 11 participating members. Microsoft Excel was used to compare the networks dyad by dyad, comparing adjacency matrices for each network. There were a total of 28 ties in the union network with which the 3 networks were being compared. Table 15 shows the results of the comparison.

	Accurate compared to Union Network	FALSE compared to Union Network
<b>Majority Threshold</b>		
Ties Present	12	4
Ties Absent	89	16
<b>Average Threshold</b>		
Ties Present	22	16
Ties Absent	77	6
<b>Binomial Threshold</b>		
Ties Present	22	16
Ties Absent	77	6

Table 15: Comparison of Expressive Consensus and Union Network for different threshold values

In the case of the expressive network, therefore, using the Majority rule and a threshold of 6, resulted in less than half of the ties being identified accurately, and a correspondingly larger number of absent ties being falsely identified. The threshold value used to generate the full consensus network was thus the one generated by the Average and Binomial approach, that value being 4. The same approach was used to determine the threshold value of 7 for the instrumental network.

### Appendix 3b. Cliques

In a network, the existence of groupings more densely connected than the overall network indicates actors who

“..interact to such an extent they could be considered a separate entity” (Borgatti, M. G. Everett & J. C. Johnson, 2013 pg.181)

In SNA such groups are referred to as cohesive sub-groups (ibid) and there are a number of ways of identifying sub-groups that may have significance in terms of the social interactions in the network.

Cliques

Cliques are a type of sub-group defined in terms of the interactions within the group. In a clique, actors are all connected to each other, technically described as being adjacent to each other. The group is said to be maximally connected. Defining a

group such that all members must be connected to all others is a strong but relatively straightforward restriction that allows the identification of important groupings within a network.

To identify a clique in a network, a minimum of 3 maximally connected actors are identified, and then other actors in the network are included until the condition of maximal connection is no longer satisfied. Typically, individual actors in networks will belong to multiple cliques, meaning the network will be comprised of many overlapping cliques.

The software UCInet (Borgatti, M. R. Everett & Freeman, 2002) can be used to perform the analysis and summarise the groupings in a network. The summary of the analysis in Chapter 5 details the cliques identified in the instrumental and expressive networks. There were 7 in each network.

## Appendix 3c. Participants' individual perceptions of central networks

### 1. Individuals' perceptions of Instrumental Networks

Participant	Perception of connections in central network	Observations, comments
George, CEO (code C3)		Structurally similar to consensus, but much denser connections between members and greater interconnection between sub-groups
Harry, Director of Education (code C3A1)		Sub groups evident, slightly different patterns of connections compared to consensus - core team more interconnected.
Noah, Director of IT (code C3A3)		Very similar to consensus structure with subgroups evident.
Jack, Chair of Trustees (code C3A4)		George, Harry central and between trustees and Heads HT sub-groups less evident, much more interconnected than consensus
Isla, Trustee (code C3A5)		Broad structure similar to consensus, but seeing herself and Harry as more central than George
Emily, Primary Expert Practitioner (code C3A8)		Emily sees herself as relatively peripheral, interacting with only two HTs; sub groups less evident with HTs more interconnected than consensus
Isabella, Head, S1 (code C3A10)		Similar structure to consensus; generally more dense connections. Isla (C3A5) more connected to HTs than to trustees and central
Sophia, Head, S2 (code C3A11)		Broadly similar structure to consensus - slightly more interaction between headsthan consensus; Leo (HT S3) and Isabella very central
Grace, Head, S5 (code C3A14)		Grace, sees interactions for herself only with Primary HTs, Harry and George; structure very similar to consensus.
Poppy, Head, S6 (code C3A15)		Poppy places her self outside most instrumental interactions - includes only those with Trust staff for herself; HTs more interconnected than consensus
Charlotte, Head, S7 (code C3A16)		Charlotte places her self outside mostoperational interactions-includes only with Trust staff; HT's more interconnected than consensus and show very dense connections

Table 16: Core Instrumental networks as perceived by each member

## 2. Individuals' perceptions of Expressive networks

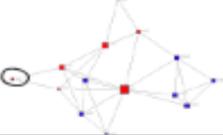
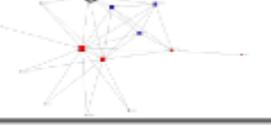
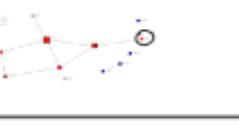
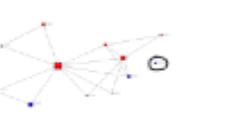
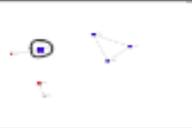
Participant	Perception of connections in central network	Observations, comments
George, CEO (code C3)		Perceives Harry to very central: overall structure similar to consensus: Self separate (1 tie)
Harry, Director of Education (code C3A1)		Perceives George to be central Overall structure similar to consensus Self marginal (2 ties)
Noah, Director of IT (code C3A3)		George and Harry central Overall structure similar to consensus Self connected similarly to others (consistent with consensus)
Jack, Chair of Trustees (code C3A4)		Harry very central A well connected structure slightly different to consensus (2ndry less connected) Self completely isolated
Isla, Trustee (code C3A5)		George and Harry very central A well connected structure, some similarities with consensus Self well connected
Emily, Primary Expert Practitioner (code C3A8)		Trust team seen as connected (albeit not dense 2-4 ties); no-one clearly central Fragmented Self Separate (1 tie)
Isabella, Head, S1 (code C3A10)		No-one central Fragmented (trust team all isolated) Self Separate (1 tie)
Sophia, Head, S2 (code C3A11)		No-one central to whole network Very Fragmented Self quite separate (tie to peer HTs)
Grace, Head, S5 (code C3A14)		Harry Central to whole network, George to a part Broadly similar to consensus with connections Self completely isolated
Poppy, Head, S6 (code C3A15)		No-one central to whole network Very fragmented Self Separate (1 tie)
Charlotte, Head, S7 (code C3A16)		No-one central to whole network Very fragmented: Central team dense; HTs separate Self separate (1 tie)

Table 17: Core Expressive networks reported as perceived by each member