Accountability of school networks:
Who is accountable to whom and for what?

M. Ehren and J. Perryman

Abstract

Quality education is of major public and private interest and, understandably, considerable effort is paid to the quality of schools and improvement of the level of education in society. Many governments recognize the limitations of centralized policy in motivating school improvement and turn to 'network governance' to coordinate school systems (Janssens and Ehren, 2016). Relying on school-to-school collaboration to coordinate education systems has far-reaching consequences for existing accountability structures, most of which were developed to support hierarchical control of individual school quality. This paper reflects on the accountability of networks of schools and on appropriate arrangements to improve the effectiveness of partnerships; our contribution starts with unpicking the question of 'who is accountable to whom and for what' in a network of schools? We discuss some common problems in the accountability of networks and describe frameworks to evaluate network-level outcomes and functioning. Examples from the accountability of Multi-Academy Trusts in England are included to contextualize our contribution.

1. Network governance

Quality education is of major public and private interest and, understandably, considerable effort is paid to the quality of schools and improvement of the level of education in society. Many governments recognize the limitations of centralized policy in motivating school improvement and look for alternative models to coordinate their education system. Burns and Koster (2016) describe a set of common trends across OECD countries, such as a greater decentralization to allow schools and their authorities to respond to local demand, a move away from hierarchical relationships between schools and national government to multi-level governance where multiple actors operate and interact at different levels. A strong central government is no longer seen as effective in addressing the needs of a global, liquid and more interdependent society. As Theisens (2012) explains, the fabric of society has changed profoundly with a decreasing influence of traditional institutions, such as political parties, unions and churches losing their power, tremendous increase in individual choice and individuals operating in a wide range of horizontal professional and social networks. These changes have made centralized coordination from one point of contact increasingly complex as the amount of information to process becomes untenable.

Meuleman (2008) describes how these changes resulted in a third form of governance in the 1990s to offer a more effective style of coordination than hierarchical control and market governance. Network governance involves policies that link different stakeholder organizations (e.g. through incentives such as subsidies) around a public policy purpose and a set of joint goals (Mayne et al, 2013). This type of governance is, according to Burns and Koster (2016) considered to be more effective as networks are more flexible than the traditional hierarchical organization of the state and therefore fit the dynamics of 'liquid modernity'. They reference the work of Elinor Ostrom which has shown that, in the absence of strong central control and powerful market forces, local networks (under certain conditions) can more effectively solve shared problems.

Díaz-Gibson et al (2014) provide examples of network governance in education and explain how community-based partnerships that provide comprehensive social, educational and health services have become an emergent strategy in Western countries to tackle complex educational challenges in child development. Educational collaborative networks, while still in their infancy, are gaining momentum in education as a reform strategy aimed at creating an interconnected approach to major educational issues,

such as persistent academic underperformance, students' transition from school to work or childhood obesity. Specific examples are the networks of mainstream and special schools in the Netherlands, tasked to provide for inclusive education for all children in a specific region; or the Area Learning Communities, established across the Northern Ireland within which schools and colleges are working to increase the range of courses for pupils in the local area.

The role of governments in such networks can, according to Theisens (in Burns and Koster, 2016) be twofold. They can either create the arena within which networks operate (e.g. establishing frameworks, formulating a strategic vision, facilitating knowledge and feedback and operating as a crowbar when participants in a network fail to cooperate effectively), or they can act as a player in the network (particularly at the local level) when working with schools, citizens and private partners to improve education.

Government policy in England has particularly taken on the first role in incentivizing a range of school-to-school partnerships, particularly the model of a 'Multi-Academy Trust' (MAT). The 2016 white paper sets out the government's intention to move all England's schools to become autonomous academies by 2022, and all academies to become part of a Multi-Academy Trust (DfE, 2016). Academies are state-funded schools, independent of local authority control; they are self-governing non-profit charitable trusts which may receive support from personal or corporate sponsors and have relatively large autonomy. By 2015, nearly two-thirds of the 4,725 academies were in MATs and there are 517 MATs that had two to five academies, 98 with 6-15 and 19 with 16 or more. MATs are chains of schools where the Trust has a single funding agreement with the Secretary of State and each academy also has a supplemental funding agreement with the Secretary of State. All academies in a MAT are run by a single board of directors, although the board of directors may decide to delegate some functions to school-level governing bodies.

The white paper 'Educational Excellence Everywhere' (DfE, 2016:57) states that: "MATs are the only structures which formally bring together leadership, autonomy, funding and accountability across a group of academies in an enduring way, and are the best long term formal arrangement for stronger schools to support the improvement of weaker schools." The collaboration of schools, under the authority of a Trust, is thought to improve the quality of teaching and the richness of children's learning. Academies within a Trust are expected to respond with greater flexibility to local context and to ensure more innovative and affordable services than schools operating on their own or under the authority of local or central government.

The introduction of networks and network governance is profoundly changing the structure of education systems and the role of governments in school improvement reform. Hierarchical lines of decision-making and control are rapidly being replaced by horizontal lines of organizing and decision-making which are much more diffuse, unclear and often lack a transparent structure (Theisens, in Burns and Koster, 2016). These changes similarly challenge traditional top down models of accountability, such as inspections of schools on a centralized framework, or league tables of student performance which evaluate single schools on a centrally defined framework and include intensive monitoring and sanctions to motivate schools to adhere to this framework. Top-down forms of accountability take little note of the position of schools within networks and the collaboration between schools towards a common purpose and discount the fact that collaboration involves lateral relationships which are built on non-hierarchical structures, often outside of central government. Centralized accountability arrangements may even be counterproductive to the aims and purposes of network governance, as the emphasis on individual agencies' performance targets and budgets gets in the way of them working together and may hinder cross-cutting work. This paper offers an understanding of the types of accountability systems that are fit for network governance and can support effective partnerships.

Our contribution starts with an outline of the purpose of accountability of educational networks. We then continue with a reflection on the problematic nature of holding educational networks to account, while the final section will unpick the question of 'who is accountable to whom and for what' in a network of schools? From this section we will propose a conceptual framework of what accountability of educational networks may look like and what measurement models are relevant to capture the focus and functioning of educational networks and provide accurate feedback to network leaders and policy-makers. The example of English MATs will be used throughout the paper to contextualize our contribution, and we will therefore start with a clarification of these type of networks.

2. Multi-Academy Trusts in England

Academies are publicly funded independent schools. They must follow the law and guidance on admissions, exclusions and special education needs and disabilities, but benefit from greater freedom[i]. They can set pay and conditions for their staff, decide on how to deliver the curriculum and they have the ability to change the length of terms and set their own school hours.

The first academies were established through an initiative from the Department of Education in 2002 to take over local authority-run schools where aspirations and achievement were deemed to be too low. Sponsors were appointed to take these so-called struggling schools out of local authority control and 'turn them around'. These sponsor-led academies receive their funding directly from the Education Funding Agency and are accountable to state government. Start-up costs of these original sponsored academies were partly funded by private means, such as entrepreneurs or NGOs, with all running costs met by Central Government. In 2010, central government expanded the role of Academies in the Academies Act (2010), in which a wide number of schools in non-deprived areas were also encouraged to become Academies. These academies are referred to as 'converter academies'. In addition, the government continued to encourage academy sponsors to take on under-performing schools, but there was no longer a requirement for non-governmental funding and the majority of new sponsors are now high performing schools, there are now over 4,500 open academies, including over half of all secondary schools in England[ii].

Most of these academies are part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) and run by a Trust. MATs are chains of schools where the Trust has a single funding agreement with the Secretary of State and each academy also has a supplemental funding agreement with the Secretary of State. All academies in the MAT are run by a single board of directors. Although the MAT may decide to delegate some functions to school-level governing bodies, the MAT remains accountable for the schools and can take all decisions on how the schools are run[iii]. Collaboration of schools within the Trust is regulated through schemes of delegation and terms of reference which outline roles and responsibilities and decision-making within the Trust.

MATs are typical examples of what Klijn and Koppenjan (2014) describe as 'mandated or goal-directed networks'. Such networks have, according to these authors, more stable patterns of social relations and deliberate structure in their interactions with organizational arrangements and rules, compared to the self-initiated networks of legally autonomous organizations working together informally to achieve a collective goal.

Under these formal governance structures, each academy retains a legally binding contract with the Secretary of State and their accountability is to both the Department for Education, through the monitoring of Regional Schools Commissioners and Ofsted inspections, as set within the network they are part of.

Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) were introduced in 2014 to coordinate the setup of academies and MATs and monitoring their performance on behalf of the Department for Education. RSCs are responsible for the academies (and free schools, UTCs and studio schools) in their area and make

decisions on applications from schools wanting to become academies and organisations wanting to sponsor an academy. Each RSC is also responsible for one of the larger national academies (e.g. ARK, E-ACT). Their main responsibilities are to[iv]:

- monitor the performance of the academies in their area
- take action when an academy is underperforming
- decide on the creation of new academies
- make recommendations to ministers about free school applications
- encourage organisations to become academy sponsors (ensuring that there are enough high-quality sponsors to meet local need, ensuring each region has a strong supply of high quality sponsors)
- proposing suitable sponsors for poorly performing maintained schools who have been selected by DfE to become sponsored academies.
- approve changes to open academies, including: changes to age ranges, mergers between academies, changes to Multi-Academy Trust arrangements

RSCs are particularly responsible for the oversight and monitoring of those academies which are in special measures or require improvement according to Ofsted. Where there is underperformance in an academy school or Trust, the Regional Schools Commissioner takes their authority from the funding agreement (the contract between the Secretary of State and the Trust). RSCs however only deal with breaches of the funding agreement on the grounds of failure to deliver a good quality education. Other potential breaches of funding agreements, such as conflicts of interest or financial mismanagement, are dealt with by the Education Funding Agency. The RSCs get support from headteacher boards (HTBs) which are made up of experienced academy headteachers in each region who advise and challenge RSCs. These headteachers are from outstanding academies and are elected by other academy headteachers in the region.

3. The purpose of accountability of networks

The shift towards network governance creates, according to Burns and Koster (2016), a complex education landscape with very real questions about which actors at which levels should be held accountable for which outcomes, and how this can function in a coherent and intelligent manner. The tension between tightly controlled accountability mechanisms which seek to minimise risk and error contradicts the fundamental purpose of network governance to allow stakeholders to flexibly respond to local context and collaborate on the basis of trust. Several authors however also explain potential unintended consequences of networks which necessitates the accountability of networks.

Mayne and Rieper (2003) for example talk about how collaboration and networking may cause members of a network, such as academies and teachers and head teachers working in those academies, to lose sight of the public objectives they are serving. The complexity of managing the network and the partnership arrangement may push the public interest aside and create a range of opportunistic behaviours. Greany and Ehren (2016) provide examples of MATs refusing to take on the most challenging schools and students in order to enhance their performance, while Ofsted (England's Inspectorate of Education) has repeatedly commented on the excessive salaries of top executives at some of England's biggest academy chains (BBC, 10 March 2016[1]).

Apart from preventing adverse effects of networking, accountability also has a role in bringing order in the relations between partners and preventing fragmented collaboration. Networks generally face a range of problems, according to Mayne and Rieper (2003), and Janssens (2015), such as:

---

[1] http://www.bbc.com/news/education-35775458

- Diffusion of roles and responsibilities with limited clarity over where to complain or who to approach when things go wrong. Hutching et al's (2014) study, for example, found that there is limited clarity over who sponsors MATs; they had great difficulty in finding organisations or individuals who take responsibility for school performance within a chain.
- Competition between partners in the network over delivery of services when partners are trying to deliver different services to the same clientele and have some home-based loyalties and preferential knowledge in delivering those services. As Gray and Jenkins (2003) explain, stakeholders drawn into collaborative arrangements rarely relinquish their own organizational agendas for the collective good of the network but rather battle to impose their own values on the overall goals of the enterprise.
  Such issues are reported by Greany and Ehren (2016) for MATs. According to these authors, new Trusts often face cultural challenges where senior education leaders of single schools, who are used to 'running their own ship', now have to work in matrix-like structures where finance, HR and marketing professionals are employed by the trust, and have to adhere to and work within the framework set by these centralized services. This creates tensions which need to be resolved for the partnership to be effective.
- Issues around service users who do not want to be associated with other users served by the same network organisation, such as when pupils going to mainstream schools do not want to be identified with students from a special needs school, or when head teachers of high performing schools do not want to be associated with a failing school in the Trust.
- Challenges in having multiple partners in the delivery of services determine success criteria for their services and potential conflicts, coordination difficulties and costs, management complexities and power issues about deciding on, and reaching common goals.
  Greany and Ehren (2016) for example talk about head teachers and teachers feeling disempowered by having to work within centralized structures of scripted curricula and lesson plans, particularly in large MATs where the CEO tries to ensure control over schools through hierarchical governance. Hill (Academies Commission, 2013) notes that the imposition of a centrally-mandated model on academies in the Trust reduces school and teacher autonomy and constrains headteachers in developing innovative practices. Some head teachers also report that much of the support from centralized staff goes to schools who are failing to meet the targets set in Ofsted's inspection framework (and are designated as 'requiring improvements' or 'in special measures'), where good and outstanding schools are either expected to fend for themselves or see their resources (e.g. teachers, teaching assistants) taken out of their school to support their poorly performing peers.
- Convergence toward groupthink when members of the network isolate themselves from outside influences and suppress conflicting viewpoints when making decisions. Groupthink is a potential risk in MATs that expect their schools to implement one and the same organizational model, and implement the same curriculum and assessment practices. Such centralized decision-making and frameworks potentially create a situation in which member schools are not encouraged to think and act independently and develop innovative solutions for local problems.
- Inefficiencies due to participant turnover and communication and meeting costs, such as when academies change membership of a Trust and have to set new working routines under a new Trust, or when large MATs introduce multiple layers of management (e.g. executive heads in charge of specific regions) to coordinate schools in the Trust and top slice schools' budgets to finance these layers.

Theisen (in Burns and Koster, 2016) also states that we still understand relatively little about how order is created in complex networks and how networks can contribute to a more effective education system. As the current education landscape in England is moving towards full academization where all schools are expected to become part of a MAT, the risk of creating an ineffective and inefficient system becomes a real one which needs to be addressed through the introduction of external accountability of Trusts.

4. Problematic accountability of networks

Developing accountability frameworks to capture the performance of networks is however not an easy task. Several authors (Mayne, 2003; Schwartz, 2003; Janssens and Ehren, 2016) talk about the problematic nature of accountability of networks, pointing to the diffuse and ambiguous nature of collaborative arrangements, the changing (contribution of members to) network-level outcomes, and the sometimes conflicting expectations of stakeholder and client groups. In this section we will reflect on these problems before describing the frameworks that can be used to hold networks accountable for their performance and functioning.

Diffuse and ambiguous nature of networks

Mayne (2003) explains how networks are often diffuse and ambiguous in nature with changing arrangements for collaboration and decision-making when partners move in and out of the network. Informal networks in particular have no agreements among partners in place on governance and financing, no common objectives tied to a public policy purpose and no shared governance to inform the external accountability framework. The partners in an informal network often join up for a specific purpose, such as to peer review each other's work or to jointly develop a new set of assessments, dismantling or leaving the network when the purpose is met or collaboration is no longer opportune. Often there is no or a limited record or database of these networks, their purpose and their members which leads them to be largely out of scope of any external accountability exercise.

However, even formal networks will see changes over time which will challenge their external accountability. Many of the MATs in England, for example, have grown rapidly over the last ten years and have changed their structure accordingly, particularly in putting in place a stronger infrastructure, with clear schemes of delegation and oversight, for example through Regional or Phase Directors, and a more professional approach to back office services (Greany and Ehren, 2016). MATs have also seen changes in their portfolio of schools where some schools have decided to join other partnerships, or where the Trust itself has decided to concentrate its work in specific regions.

Changes are a common feature of networks, according to Mayne (2003) as partnership work goes hand in hand with compromise and negotiation where partners try to work towards a magnitude of outcomes, and try to find the most effective way to share decision-making authority, risks, resources and benefits of the partnership arrangement. As a result, networks will have diffuse and changing arrangements around collaboration, with roles and responsibilities that are changing and sometimes difficult to track. These changing structures and modes of collaboration complicate how organizations are held to account and raise difficult questions about 'who is accountable to whom and for what'?

Changing (contribution of members to) network-level outcomes

The dynamics of collaboration also have an impact on the objective of the network and the purpose of partners' collaboration. As Schwartz (2003) explains, the aims and objectives of networks are often not centrally defined, but result from collaborative efforts and fragile compromises between partners with different political, social and economic aims. Most schools in the network will be ill at ease with being held to account for something they don't have complete control over, and traditional top down models of accountability will have great difficulty in disentangling how being in the network has impacted on the performance of its individual members, or to what extent each member has contributed to network-level outcomes.

In England, the funding agreement between the Department of Education and single academies and their Trust, as well as the scheme of delegation within the Trust are the main instruments to clarify the roles and responsibilities for network-level outcomes. The agreements and delegation schemes set out the lines of accountability and how power structures are organized, which allows the Department for Education, as well as Ofsted and the Regional Schools Commissioner, who monitor the performance of academies and

Trusts, to understand the structure of a MAT and the school's position within it, the purpose of the collaboration and where responsibilities lie when the purpose is not met. The Department for Education endorses a clear networking arrangement by only approving funding agreements with single academies and their Trust which show clear lines of accountability, where the Trust has a transparent scheme of delegation in place which sets out which powers of the MAT's board of directors will be delegated to local governing bodies.

However, network objectives and structures for collaboration to meet those objectives often change over time as partners leave the network, new partners with new goals join the network or the external environment of the network evolves. Government reforms in England have, for example, seen proposals to introduce a new legal framework for an all academy system, a move to a more skills-focused school governance system, and changes to the transfer of land when community schools convert to academy status. These changes will create new opportunities or trivialize some of the network's purposes and ways of collaboration. Changes in membership can however only be formalized when funding agreements expire after seven years, unless schools are underperforming and are being rebrokered. Schemes of delegation on the other hand can be revised more flexibly throughout this seven-year period.

Expectations of client and stakeholder groups

A third complicating factor in the accountability of networks are the expectations of the network's various client and stakeholder groups. Schwartz (2003) and Mayne and Rieper (2003) explain how each partner in a network has its own client and stakeholder groups (e.g. parents and students) who will have different objectives and aims for the service they are receiving. Through their choice of schools, or 'voting with their feet' they also have the means to evaluate, reward or punish the network member that is delivering their service, creating a complex set of accountability relationships where members in the network will have to satisfy and negotiate a multitude of conflicting interests. Networks that serve a highly heterogeneous group of clients and stakeholders with views that are different to the purpose of the network will again have difficulty in answering the question of 'who is accountable to whom and for what'?

5. Accountability of networks

Burns and Koster (2016) argue for strong accountability that explicitly acknowledges this kind of complexity and uses a constructive approach which balances regulation and evaluation with excellence and equality. According to these authors, accountability systems need to keep a clear focus on achievement and excellence while being nuanced enough to allow for innovation, creativity and a rounded learning experience. An important question is therefore how accountability mechanisms can be designed to strengthen the maturing of networks and support their collaboration to improve outcomes, while similarly preventing potential adverse effects of collaboration.

Localized approach to evaluation

<Authors> have used Alkin's (2013) framework of evaluation theories to suggest specific examples of *methodology*, *judgements* and *user focus and involvement* in holding educational networks to account, for example by Inspectorates of Education. Their model includes a qualitative, interpretative and flexible approach of validating good practices of localized and collaborative provision and improvement of education, such as through the use of 'developmental evaluation' or 'participatory evaluation'. In <authors> proposed model, Inspectorates of Education facilitate evaluations which are goal-free, flexible and specific to context and information needs of (network of) schools and stakeholders. Network members and their stakeholders are involved in all the phases of the accountability exercise, from developing the standards and methods for evaluation, to deciding on how to improve the performance of the network and potential consequences for failure. Such an approach allows Inspectorates of Education

to engage network members and their stakeholders in making constant judgements about what type of behaviour is effective and appropriate in which settings and allows for a deep understanding of how networks operate and are effective in solving local problems. Their facilitation of evaluation and inspection, instead of making judgements on a centralized framework, respects the specific purpose of different networks, while similarly bringing order to the diffuse and sometimes ambiguous nature of collaborative arrangements.

Multiple levels of evaluation and outcomes

Networks have multiple layers of practice and outcomes which need to be clarified when deciding on who is accountable to whom and for what. Popp et al's (2013) provide a framework to analyse outcomes of networks, in which they distinguish outcomes on the individual, organisational, network and community level. Outcomes on the individual level include, according to Popp et al (2013), an assessment of the impact of the network on the individuals who interact in the network on behalf of their respective organizations and on individual clients, and equally also the contribution of individuals to network-level outcomes. Such outcomes would typically be addressed in performance management schemes and annual staff development reviews, such as when head teachers observe and discuss the quality of lessons of individual teachers, and discuss the conditions (support and resources) within which (head) teachers are working.

The organisational level is about the performance of member organisations, such as the schools in a Trust, their contribution to network-level outcomes and how their performance is conditioned by the network they are part of. Accountability frameworks (both internal and external) are particularly organized to measure outcomes of network members, such as through internal school-evaluation, peer review, school inspections or high stakes testing and the publication of league tables, but the focused inspections and MAT review have started to question how performance of schools is influenced by the Trust they are part of, particularly the support they receive for school improvement. There is however little scrutiny over the contribution of schools to the performance of the network, other than an evaluation of how supportive schools are of other schools.

Network-level outcomes are those we introduced at the start, and the raison d'être for the collaboration between organisations and individuals within those organisations. These joint efforts and network-level outcomes are categorized by Gray et al (2003) who describe three common purposes for networks where the creation of synergy and the enhancement of financial efficiency are particular aims of MATs.
Synergy is created when the partnership adds value by combining mutually reinforcing interests. Most of the MATs will have this purpose as their central aim is, according to Hutchings et al (2014), for member schools (particularly failing ones) to benefit from the support and expertise of their sponsor and from other member schools in the network. Schools in a Trust can benefit from membership by maximizing curriculum range, sharing playgrounds, or sharing professional development. Burgess (2016) refers to two models currently used; one of vertical integration which sees secondary schools joining with a primary school, or horizontal integration where schools join with another school in the same sector to form a MAT. Synergy can be found, according to Burgess (2016) in strengthening parental engagement, where parents are firstly engaged with schools and keep their child in the MAT throughout their primary and secondary education, making secondary school intake more reliable, or saving staff-time in fundraising if both the primary and secondary school staff engage in alumni fundraising and students only become alumni upon graduating from their secondary school. Benefits of horizontal integration are re-balancing of curriculum offerings between the two schools, while staff career pathways internally can also be broadened.
Enhancing financial efficiency is also an important purpose for MATs. According to Burgess (2016), MATs can maximize the use of resources across the member schools or generate extra resources, such as

through value for money procurement, back-office savings, or using school and classroom infrastructure across a number of schools.

An evaluation of outcomes on the community level would look at the contribution of the network to the community it serves, such as improving employment rates within a region or enhancing social cohesion. The current accountability framework of MATs largely ignores these outcomes, but examples of area-wide evaluations and inspections would capture such outcomes.
Table 1 summarizes these four outcomes and provides examples for MATs.

Table 1: Levels of analysis in inter-organizational network evaluation (adapted from Popp et al., 2013, p. 70)

Level of analysis	Description of outcomes	Example outcomes for MATs
Individual	Assessment of the impact that the network has on the individuals who interact in the network on behalf of their respective organisations and on individual clients, and the impact of the individual on the functioning and performance of the network	- Quality of teaching and school leadership - Support from centralized staff of individual teachers and head teachers
Organisation	Assessment of the impact that the network has on the member organisations, and the contribution of network members to overall network effectiveness	- School outcomes of individual schools and capacity to improve - Support from trust for school improvement (e.g. staff development)
Network	Assessment of the network itself can have a variety of foci (synergy, transformation, efficiency), many of which depend on the relative maturity of the network. The strengths of relationships across the network is an important focus, as well as the structure and purpose (e.g. network membership growth, relationship strengths, member commitment to network goals)	- Improved transition between primary and secondary schools - Greater parental involvement throughout children's school career - Efficiency of back office services
Community	Assessment of the contributions that the network makes to the community it was established to serve	- Improved employment rates within a community - Improved social cohesion - Decline in crime rates

Accountability frameworks need to develop evaluation criteria and standards that reflect such purposes of the network and evaluate whether networks such as MATs add value, and are developed in ways which maximise their capacity to enhance collaboration between schools, to improve the quality of teachers and teaching and to enhance the richness of children's learning and progress. Tracing network objectives and evaluating achievement towards those objectives will, according to Gray et al (2003), bring order to the potential complexity of relationships within the network and assess the value of these relationships in delivering the agreed standards of outcomes and means. Evaluation can, according to Gray et al (2003), also facilitate knowledge building and inform debates and choices about alternative forms of collaboration or ways to strengthen the partnership work. In such forms of accountability, measurement shifts from being a technique to determine the precise magnitude of things and to prove and judge the level of achieved performance to developing a thorough understanding of what a network is accomplishing.

In England, the accountability of MATs is primarily organized through focused inspections and MAT reviews by the Education Inspectorate (Ofsted) and the monitoring of Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs). The inspection handbook explains how focused inspections include coordinated visits to all the schools in a chain within a period of two weeks, and interviews with central staff of the Trust and where a letter is published on the strengths and weaknesses of schools across a Trust. These focused inspections and MAT reviews are however not common practice as there is no legislation or regulation in place to

task Ofsted with the inspections of MATs. Inspectors who lead on inspections of individual schools within a focused inspection will look for differences and common issues between schools in analysing questionnaires from students, parents and staff during inspection visits. Common issues across schools will be shared and discussed between the lead inspectors during the inspection week(s), particularly with a view to discuss any features that could lead to common areas for further improvement relating to the impact of the chain. There is no framework in place to assess and grade the support provided by the Trust or the effectiveness of its governance as Ofsted is, under current legislation, only allowed to inspect schools with a Unique Reference Number (URN). There are however informal, unpublished guidelines and standards in place for the MAT review. The following questions, which were included in the letter to the School Partnership Trust Academies (SPTA), provide an idea of the standards used during focused inspections and the MAT review[v]:

- How well does SPTA understand the context, strengths and weaknesses of their academies?
- How well does SPTA hold their academies to account? What structures are in place to do this? How is the improvement journey monitored?
- How does SPTA challenge and support their academies?
- What evidence is there of the impact of the Trust?

These questions are also asked during inspections of single schools in interviews for which representatives of the Trust are invited. Collaborative development is now also an important part of inspection judgements of single school quality. As the inspection handbook outlines, school leadership can only be judged to be outstanding when a contribution to system-wide improvement can be evidenced, and reducing the frequency of inspection visits if inspectors' quality assurance of a school's self-evaluation demonstrates it is sound and underpinned by rigorous external peer review (see also Ofsted report 'Unseen Children').

The Regional Schools Commissioners (RSC) have an important role in the set up and monitoring of academies and MATs. They deal with breaches of the funding agreement on the grounds of failure to deliver a good quality education, which is defined as academies which are:
- not meeting key stage 2 or key stage 4 floor standards,
- on a downwards trajectory,
- or judged to be inadequate by Ofsted.

The monitoring of academies and their Trust is also by more informal arrangements (or 'soft intelligence'), such as meetings between the Regional Schools Commissioner and his/her board of head teachers from the region, and conversations with the Local Authority. There is no framework for monitoring and supporting of failing schools by the RSCs, but the education select committee's recent inquiry into MATs (and the interview with the national schools commissioner, David Carter[2]) suggests the use of a 'health check' which looks at school standards and the Trust's track record of improvement, particularly in improving the attainment of disadvantaged pupils.

The 2013/2014 annual inspection report also describes how the RSCs have started to work with Ofsted's regional directors in sharing knowledge about academies and their Trust. As the regional HMIs and Regional School Commissioners however cover different regions, this knowledge exchange is not straightforward.

Accountable for what: functioning of networks to achieve outcomes

Several authors also describe *how* networks can be organized effectively to achieve their intended outcomes. Research on effective school networks (West, 2010; CUREE centre, 2005; Muijs et al, 2010)

---

[2] http://schoolsweek.co.uk/health-check-for-growing-academy-trusts-will-focus-on-standards-and-improvement/

indicates that effective networks have specific structural features (governance structure, size, geographical spread), as well as effective relations between individuals and schools in the network (reciprocity, continuity and regularity of interaction, transparency, trust etc).

According to Provan and Kenis (2008), governance structures need to be adapted to relational contingencies in the network to be effective. These authors explain how larger networks will struggle to have effective forms of bottom-up shared governance as members will either ignore critical network issues or spend large amounts of time trying to coordinate across 10, 20, or more organizations, particularly when participants are spread out geographically. Larger networks often also face problems with the distribution of trust across the network and with ensuring goal consensus. Such large networks are therefore more effective, according to Provan and Kenis (2008) with brokered forms of network governance, where a separate administrative entity governs the network and its activities. Shared governance is most likely to be effective when trust is pervasive throughout the network and provides a strong basis for bottom-up collaboration among network members. Bottom-up initiated collaboration among all members is, according to Provan and Kenis (2008), less essential in more centralized networks where a lead organization coordinates collaboration through dyadic ties with individual members.

Evaluating the structural and relational contingencies of networks enhances our understanding of how networks can be improved to more effectively fulfil their purpose; it also allows us to understand which network configurations are developing across the education system to improve outcomes overall.

As the previous section indicated, the accountability framework of MATs in England particularly addresses the collaboration between schools and support of the Trust, and emphasizes clarity and transparency in schemes of delegation and organizational structure and decision-making. There is however little notion of the interplay between structure and relations and how these impact on network-level outcomes. Relevant questions for the design of such frameworks are, according to Popp et al. (2013, p. 68):
- Does the network have a clear vision and goals that are understood and supported by all members?
- Is the governance structure a good fit for this network?
- Is the network appropriately resourced to do its work?
- Does the leadership style fit with what we know about effective network leadership?
- Are important management tasks being attended to, and is the management focus evolving appropriately over time?
- Is attention being paid to both the management of the network, and management in the network?
- Does the network have both the internal and the external legitimacy it requires?
- Is the network/relationship structure evolving as expected and contributing positively to the work of the network?
- Is there an optimal mix of strong and weak ties among network members?
- Are the linkages targeted and appropriate?
- Is there trust among network members?
- Are power differentials being recognized and addressed as appropriate?
- Are there multiple levels of involvement?
- Is there a balance of stability and flexibility?

Network-internal mechanisms of quality control

The previous sections proposed a framework for the accountability of networks, putting the specific outcomes of the network and their structural and relational configuration at the heart of the accountability exercise. Even though networks members and their stakeholders play an important role in setting the standards and informing the evaluation, in our proposed framework national government continues to be in charge of the accountability of networks. Hooge et al (2012) however emphasize the need for more horizontal and professional forms of accountability where relevant stakeholders have a fruitful dialogue about decisions, performance, expectations and judgements and build the capacity to effectively engage in such processes themselves. Aviram (2003) and Mandell and Keast (2007) write about four quality control mechanisms of mature networks which provide a helpful framework to understand such professional accountability in the context of educational networks.

The first mechanism is the collection and dissemination of information on the credibility and quality of network partners. Such an *information mechanism* facilitates independent decisions on the contribution of members of the network-to-network level outcomes and allows the network to make informed decisions on improving collaboration or centralized support services, or decisions on excluding partners who act opportunistically, degrade the overall performance of the network, or destroy the reputation of the network. Peer reviews between schools within MATs, and reviews of the quality of central services are examples of an information mechanism. Such reviews can provide information on whether schools act opportunistically by admitting only students from privileged backgrounds, whether the performance of the entire network is degraded when the network has too many failing schools requiring high levels of support from central staff, causing a decline in the performance of well performing schools and damaging the reputation of the Trust.

Mature networks also have formal and transparent procedures in place to exclude opportunistic or failing partners (*'exclusion mechanism'*) or to replace ineffective transactions and collaboration with more effective ones (referred to as a *'switching mechanism'*), according to Aviram (2003). In England, the *exclusion mechanism* operates through the RSCs who are in charge of removing schools from a Trust or rebrokering schools into other Trusts after the funding agreement expires. Several authors (Hill, 2008, 2013; Greany and Ehren, 2016) argue for greater clarity in these procedures, particularly of the criteria used to re-broker schools, and also for shorter timelines of funding agreements (from seven to five years) to allow academies to change networks more easily.

A fourth mechanism to control and improve quality within networks is 'control'. The *control mechanism* includes the centralized control of transacting facilities and other members' assets between schools in the network and centralized offices. Particularly, large MATs have such strong centralized control in place in the form of central staff providing services to member schools (e.g. HR, finances, operations, professional development). They sometimes also control and regulate the teaching and learning in schools, such as by prescribing curricula, lesson plans, time tables and assessment schemes. These services are paid for by top slicing a percentage of the schools' budgets.

These mechanisms are important for the stability and the performance of the network and its long term survival. They support the development of successful collaboration where collaboration between partners leads to the creation of a new organizational form that exists by itself, independently from the network partners and where network participants feel they are part of a whole and no longer only loyal to their 'home school' or pressured to ensure only their own school is performing well. Accountability frameworks which evaluate and reinforce the functioning of these mechanisms, as well as the fit between structural and relational contingencies of the network will be more effective in ensuring these networks meet their intended outcomes on the longer term (see Mandell and Keast, 2007).

Towards an accountability framework for networks

In this paper we explained how many governments are moving towards 'network governance' to coordinate their education system in an attempt to address the limitations of centralized policy. We argued that traditional forms of top down accountability, such as through inspections of schools on a centralized framework, are no longer relevant in such systems as they take little note of the position of schools within networks and the collaboration between schools towards a common purpose. Our paper offered a conceptual framework to understand relevant forms of external accountability of educational networks which use a more localized approach of validating good (network) practice and outcomes, evaluating outcomes on the individual, organizational, network and community level and an understanding of the structural and relational contingencies of the network in meeting these outcomes. We also argued for four internal mechanisms of quality control which should inform the internal/professional accountability of the network.

Throughout the paper we have provided an example of the accountability of MATs in England. MATs are mandated networks, governed by a lead organization. These types of networks are relatively stable and goal-directed and the question of 'who is accountable for what and to whom' is therefore relatively straightforward to answer compared to the accountability of informal, self-initiated networks that are more fluent and subject to change. Our example highlighted how MATs are particularly held accountable on the outcomes of each individual member school, with limited accountability on the individual, network or community level. Outcomes include indicators of (individual) school performance, as well as the collaboration between schools and the functioning of the Trust in supporting school improvement. The framework used by Ofsted and the RSCs is fairly standardized with limited flexibility in looking at specific outcomes of MATs or having MATs and their stakeholders set the agenda for the accountability exercise.

Such a standardized approach excludes the more flexible approaches discussed in this paper and which were considered to support networks that operate in situations of high uncertainty where network members are dealing with unpredictable and risky situations. As Klijn et al (2010) explain, in those situations actors do not know what to expect and how other actors will behave; in their search for new products or innovative processes, they cannot foresee what the outcome will be, and the risk of investing in such a process is high because of the potential misuse of information or 'cherry picking' by other network members. The benefits of collaboration are unclear and difficult to estimate beforehand and engaging in external accountability will add additional risks, particularly when a standardized frameworks minimizes differences between network members and limit the confrontation of different ideas and expertise. Sydow (2004) therefore warns against formalized evaluation, particularly of new networks that still need to develop high trust relationships to deal with the uncertainty of their collaboration.

<authors> additionally argue that external accountability of networks operating in situations of high uncertainty can only really work if the education system in which they function is characterized by high levels of reciprocal trust. In such a context, accountability becomes a tool for learning and improvement instead of control; dissolving boundaries between schools and other relevant providers in the area, the Inspectorate of Education and policy-makers and ensuring that the goal of 'good education; is a shared responsibility and endeavour. In such a context, network members can respond quickly to local problems, professionally scrutinize and share local solutions and ensure that school collaboration is not just an 'end in itself' but successfully contributes to improvement of education and student outcomes, even in challenging circumstances.

References

Aviram, A. (2003). Regulation by networks. *Brigham young university law review*, (4), pp. 1179-1238. Retrieved from
http://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2181&context=lawreview.

Burgess (2016). Blog Academy governance. https://myacademies.org.uk/pages/219/blog/ (retrieved May 2016)

Burns, T., & Köster, F. (2016). Governing Education in a Complex World. Educational Research and Innovation. *OECD Publishing*.

Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) (2005). *Systematic research review: the impact of networks on pupils, practitioners, organisations and the communities they serve*. Nottingham: National College. Retrieved from
http://www.curee.co.uk/files/publication/1219841354/Impact_of_Networks_Leaflet.pdf

Daly, J., ed. 2010. Social Network Theory and Educational Change. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Department for Education (2015) 'Schools in academy chains and LAs: Performance measures'. Online. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-in-academy-chains-and-las-performance-measures (accessed 30 June 2015).

Department for Education (2016) *Educational Excellence Everywhere*, Cm 9230, London: Department for Education.

Díaz-Gibson, J. Civís-Zaragoza, M. & Guàrdia-Olmos, J. (2014). Strengthening education through collaborative networks: leading the cultural change. *School Leadership & Management*, 34:2, 179-200, DOI: 10.1080/13632434.2013.856296

Gray, A., Jenkins, B. & Leeuw, F. (2003). Collaborative Government and Evaluation: The Implications of a New Policy Instrument (p. 1-29). In: A. Gray, B. Jenkins, F. Leeuw, J. Mayne (Eds). *Collaboration in Public Services: The Challenge for Evaluation.* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Greany, T., and Ehren, M.C.M. (2016). Written evidence to Education Select Committee inquiry into the performance, accountability and governance of Multi-Academy Trusts.
http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/education-committee/multiacademy-trusts/written/32050.html

Hill, R. (2008) *Chain reactions*, Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.

Hill, R. Dunford, J. Parish, N. Rea, S. and Sandals, L. (2012). *The growth of academy chains: implications for leaders and leadership*, National College for School Leadership.

Hill, R. (2013). Written evidence to inquiry to Academies Commission.
https://roberthilleducationblog.com/academy-chains/

Hooge, E., Burns, T., & Wilkoszewski, H. (2012). Looking beyond the numbers: Stakeholders and

multiple school accountability. *OECD Education Working Papers*, (85), 0_1.

Hutchings, M., Francis, B., & de Vries, R. (2014). Chain effects: the impact of academy chains on low income students. The Sutton Trust.

Janssens, F.J. and Ehren, M.C.M. (2016). Toward a model of school inspections in a polycentric system. *Evaluation and Program Planning,* 56, 88 - 98

Jenkins, B., Leeuw, F. & Van Thiel, S. (2003). Quangos, Evaluation and Accountability in Collaborative Government. (p.53-83). In: A. Gray, B. Jenkins, F. Leeuw, J. Mayne (Eds). *Collaboration in Public Services: The Challenge for Evaluation.* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Klijn, E.H., J. Edelenbos, B. Steijn (2010), Trust in governance networks; its impact and outcomes, Administration and Society, vol 42 (2): 193-221

Mandell, M., & Keast, R. (2007). Evaluating network arrangements: Toward revised performance measures. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 30(4), 574-597.

Mayne, J. (2003). Results-Based Governance: Collaborating for Outcomes (p. 155-179). In: A. Gray, B. Jenkins, F.Leeuw, J. Mayne (Eds). *Collaboration in Public Services: The Challenge for Evaluation.* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Mayne, J., Wileman, T., & Leeuw, F. (2003). Networks and partnering arrangements: New challenges for evaluation and auditing (p. 29-51). In: A. Gray, B. Jenkins, F.Leeuw, J. Mayne (Eds). *Collaboration in Public Services: The Challenge for Evaluation.* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Mayne, J. and Rieper, O. (2003). Collaborarating for Public Service Quality: the Implications for Evaluation. In: A. Gray, B. Jenkins, F. Leeuw, J. Mayne (Eds). Collaboration in Public Services: The Challenge for Evaluation. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Meuleman, L. (2008). *Public management and the metagovernance of hierarchies, networks and markets: the feasibility of designing and managing governance style combinations*. Springer Science & Business Media.

Moolenaar, N., and P. Sleegers. 2010. "Social Networks, Trust and Innovation. How Social Relationships Support Trust and Innovative Climates in Dutch Schools." In Social Network Theory and Educational Change, edited by A. J. Daly, 97–115. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Popp, J., MacKean, G., Casebeer, A., Milward, H. B., & Lindstrom, R. (2013). *Inter-organizational networks: A critical review of the literature to Inform practice*. Retrieved from http://www.businessofgovernment.org/sites/default/files/Inter-Organizational%20Networks_0.pdf

Provan, K., & Kenis, P. (2008). Modes of network governance: Structure, management, and effectiveness. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(2), 229-252.

Salokangas, M. and Chapman, C. (2014) Exploring governance in chains of academy schools, *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, 42/3 pp372-386.

Schwartz, R. (2003). The Politics of Evaluating Government Collaboration with the Third Sector. In: A. Gray, B. Jenkins, F. Leeuw, J. Mayne (Eds). Collaboration in Public Services: The Challenge for Evaluation. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers

Theisens, H. (2012). *Governance in Interessante Tijden, een essay.* [Governance in interesting times; an essay]. The Hague: Haagse Hogeschool.

West, M. (2010). School-to-school cooperation as a strategy for improving student outcomes in challenging contexts. *School effectiveness and school improvement*, 21(1), 93-112.

---

[i] Local authorities however remain responsible for Special Educational Needs and Safeguarding of pupils both in their maintained schools as in academies, but they need to voice concerns about these (and other issues) in academies to the Secretary of State (see Department for Education, May 2014, Schools causing concern; Statutory guidance for local authorities).

[ii] http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/Education/report-education-academies-and-schools.pdf

[iii] http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/Education/report-education-academies-and-schools.pdf

[iv] https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/increasing-the-number-of-academies-and-free-schools-to-create-a-better-and-more-diverse-school-system/supporting-pages/regional-schools-commissioners-rscs

[v] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/379234/School_*20Parters hip*_20Trust_20Academies_20_28SPTA_29_20inspection_20outcome_20letter.pdf