

# A narrative approach to knowledge and communication in multi-level governance structures in the public services: the case of education.

Dr Jacqueline A Baxter

Department of Public Policy and Management, The Open University Business School.

[Jacqueline.baxter@open.ac.uk](mailto:Jacqueline.baxter@open.ac.uk)

## Abstract

The form and shape of public education in England has undergone seismic changes particularly since 2010. Many schools have converted to become academies, with the concomitant curricular and financial freedoms this status confers, and more still have joined or been taken over by Multi-Academy Trusts. These large organizational collaborations involve multi-level governance structures and present complex challenges for boards and senior leadership teams. One particular area of challenge is the ability of the MAT to remain in touch with the numerous and diverse school communities that fall within its remit. This paper employs a narrative approach to strategic decision making to investigate a specific area of strategic decision making in multi-level governance structures in the public services : community knowledge. It investigates not only the sources of this knowledge but also the relative legitimacy and credibility placed on these differing sources. In so doing it also evaluates the narrative approach, and examines what particular contributions it makes to research in this area. It concludes that the narrative approach has yielded insights into the role of trust and the ostensibly de valuing of the role of parent knowledge. It also concludes that in order to explore this area more fully, the follow on project will need to include analysis on trust within the organizations and how this impacts on information flow through each tier of the hierarchy within MATs. As such it contributes to knowledge in the role of narrative in strategy research whilst also emphasising its ability to link into powerful identity work of individuals who take on board roles in such organisations.

## 1. Introduction, rationale and background to the research

Over the course of the last 10 years education systems and how they are governed in England, Northern Ireland and Wales have undergone rapid and unprecedented levels of change (Baxter, 2016 ) This is particularly true of England which now possesses a system largely driven by targets, performance measures and evaluation linked to attainment of government mandated targets (Ozga, 2011).The target driven culture infuses many countries within the OECD and has been influenced by quantitative countrywide result comparisons such as the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) report. England has particularly wholeheartedly embraced the discourse of education as an economic driver, evidenced by the large amount of market based reforms that have been undertaken by governments since 1988 (Ozga, 2009) These reforms increased under the Coalition Administration who came to power in 2010 and introduced reforms that dramatically increased the pace and scale of change in education as a public service. These changes have manifested as: the removal of power of Local Education Authorities (Lawn, 2013), increasing curricular and financial freedoms for schools in the shape of free schools and academies (Higham & Hopkins, 2007) and raising the bar in inspection and regulation of schools (Grek, & Segerholm, 2015).

Many schools which were formerly overseen by Local Education Authorities (LEA) have converted to become semi-autonomous state schools in the form of Academies. Operational drivers, such as the need to combine in order to cost effectively buy in services once provided by LEAs, combined with research that implies that schools grouping together contribute positively to student progress,(Chapman, Collins, Sammons, Armstrong, & Muijs, 2009), have resulted in Academy Chains, Multi Academy Trusts and other less formal forms of collaboration such as federations.

Volunteer governors once responsible for governing and oversight of a single school are now situated in tiered and hierarchical multi-level governance structures.

The number of Mats in England has increased from 391 in 2011 to 1,121 in 2016 (HoCEC, 2017). MATs are formed from academy schools – schools that are free from financial and curricular control by Education Authorities. They may be small, numbering 3-5 schools or far larger, encompassing over 50 schools. The National Governance Association offers some perspective with regard to MAT size and shape. This is shown in table 1 along with approximate numbers of students.

Descriptor	Size of MAT	Number of students (approx.)
Small	1-5	1,200
Medium	6-15	5000
Large	16-30	12,000
Very Large	30+	12,000 +

### Types of MAT in relation to number of schools in England

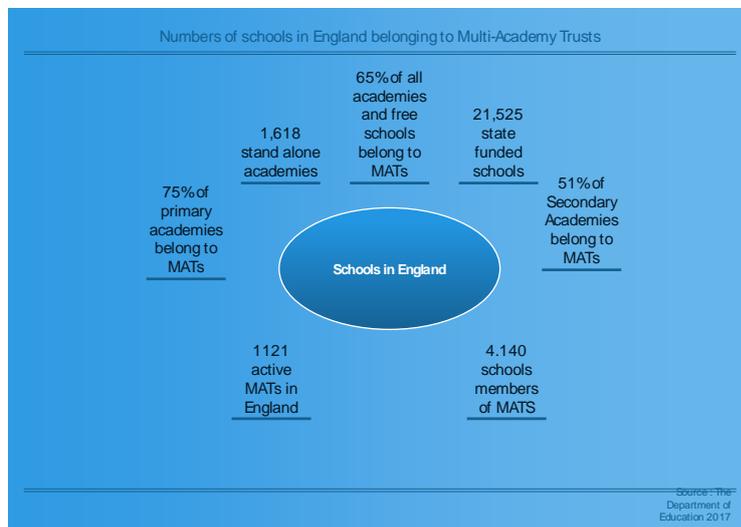


Figure 1 Number of schools in England Belonging to MATs

Table 1.

As the literature on multi-level governance in both the public and not-for-profit sector reveals, (Foss, Husted, & Michailova, 2010 ;Cornforth, 2012)), providing strategic direction for a number of organizations, which may also be widely geographically dispersed creates a number of challenges for those responsible for setting the strategic direction of the organisation –the governing boards and senior leadership teams. Previous research into public sector organisations has revealed two key challenges for boards governing multi-level organisations: Sources of information and the communication of this information across the organisation (Foss et al., 2010). The whole area of the nature of information used in strategic decision making is a complex as previous research into school governance has illustrated (see for example: Baxter, 2016 ;Baxter, 2017a;Baxter, 2017).

One of the key sources of information when a school is deciding on its strategy (be it curricular, financial or capital), is information about the community that feeds the school. This is challenging enough when only a single school is involved, but even more so when multi-academy trusts are spread over a number of areas and communities, some of which are completely different both culturally and socio economically. This leaves a question mark over whether schools are able to tap into these rich sources of information in order to inform their strategies.

The complexity and challenge involved in operationalising multi-level structures is not to be underestimated ;they pose considerable challenge for both staff and governing board/s. Chris Cornforth, researching governance in the third sector points out that, '*these systems are often tension filled and can vary in their degrees of cohesiveness, autonomy, centralization and in their shared visions*' (Cornforth, 2012,p.15). The expansion and functioning of these organisations is governed partly by the regulatory system they inhabit. In the case of English schools, this too is complex and schools are regulated by a number of bodies: The EFA –The Education Funding Agency: a body which regulates the financial and governance elements of MATS; Ofsted, the schools' inspectorate, whose dual policy role, as both implementer and shaper of policy (see, Baxter, 2016), provides the judgements as a consequence of which, schools are joined to other schools in order to either support or be supported ;The National Schools Commissioner and regional schools commissioners who work with school leaders to take action in underperforming schools and as part of the Department for Education. Each RSC supported by a headteacher board (HTB), made up of experienced academy headteachers and other sector leaders who advise and challenge RSCs on the decisions they make.

RSCs main responsibilities include:

- taking action where academies and free schools are underperforming
- intervening in academies where governance is inadequate
- deciding on applications from local-authority-maintained schools to convert to academy status
- improving underperforming maintained schools by providing them with support from a strong sponsor
- encouraging and deciding on applications from sponsors to operate in a region
- taking action to improve poorly performing sponsors
- advising on proposals for new free schools
- advising on whether to cancel, defer or enter into funding agreements with free school projects
- deciding on applications to make significant changes to academies and free schools. (Parliament, 2016)

Just as in the not-for-profit sector, boards and management in MATs are interdependent and strongly linked to organizational effectiveness (Baxter, 2016 ; Green & Griesinger, 1996). But researchers into intraorganizational collaborations such as MATs identify two main issues which exist even when all parties are keen for the collaboration to work well. They describe these as collaborative advantage and collaborative inertia, '*capturing a fundamental and practical tension between what is aimed for in collaboration and the challenges of achieving this in practice.*' (Huxham & Vangen, 2013,p.10). In the case of schools, there is little doubt that there are advantages, both pedagogical and managerial, to be gained by collaboration, but there is also the risk that the collaboration will end in inertia, stagnating due to the failures of the organizations to blend and become one. There are undoubted tensions in the school sector as organizations strive to retain their own identities whilst also attempting to meld with that of the parent organization (Baxter, 2017). The sheer number of instances in which MATs have failed to improve schools within their organizations or have experienced financial difficulties illustrate that these collaborations are no easier in the education sector than they are elsewhere. (HCEC, 2014-15). Widmer and Houchin for example (Widmer & Houchin, 1999,p.29), point out that federated governance arrangements often experience a tension between the need for greater efficiency and centralization and the need for 'representation' of local interests.' The representation of local interests has recently been undermined by government in their drive to recruit on a skills basis; this has meant that the democratic representative role of the board member is no longer a core element within MAT boards (Baxter & Farrell, 2015)

## A complex environment: Research Questions

Governance arrangements within multi-level organisations are both hierarchical and intra-organizational and infused with tensions at both organizational and intraorganizational levels (Bradshaw.P. & Toubiana, 2014). Yet in spite of the clear difficulties in this area there is a surprising lack of research into the governance of these complex organisations' (Cornforth, 2012,p.13).

Previous quantitative research into MATs (Baxter, 2016), using quantitative and qualitative data revealed particular sources of information that MAT boards seek out in order to perform their strategic role. It also identified the importance of school communication with communities as a source of information. Although the work identified different sources of information available to governing boards in MATs it failed to identify their legitimacy and relative value in the strategic process. This paper builds on that research in seeking to identify sources of information about school communities that is used within the processes of strategic decision making, and which of these sources appear to have most value/legitimacy from the perspective of board members. The second research question explores the use of a narrative approach within the research. This is an approach that I have used in other facets of identity work and in this paper I explore its adaptation to this particular strand of the research into governance. I expand upon the rationale for this method in section three of this paper.

The paper begins with a note on terminology, it continues by offering an overview of MATs and governance structures within them. Following on from this it explores the narrative approach and why it is the focus of this paper, this is further elaborated on in the methodology section which follows on. The paper concludes with a summary and discussion of the findings and concludes by discussing their implications for a funded future research project.

### Terminology – a note.

*It has become confusing for people that were originally called school governors to find themselves being addressed by a plethora of other terms. Whilst this is important from an identity perspective, it is not the focus of this paper. Therefore all individuals that volunteer their services in a governance or advisory role are referred to as board members. The paper also refers to trustees- board members who sit at the top of the hierarchy of governance in MATs.*

## 2. Multi Academy Trusts: Structure and governance

As table one indicates, MATs can vary in size and geographical spread, but whatever their size and scope, they possess hierarchical structures of governance that imply substantial challenge, not only for the overarching board of trustees, but equally in relation to the governing boards that sit under them. As figure 2 indicates, the board of trustees is supplemented by a number of governing committees overseeing: finance; standards and Resources. In very large MATs that are geographically dispersed there are further levels of governance including: Cluster Committees and a Cluster CEO (or head teacher), these committees are responsible for schools located in geographical proximity to one another.

When MATS take over new schools , either of their own volition or at the behest of the Regional Schools Commissioner , they appear to be adopting two structures depending upon whether schools are seen as weak (in terms of their last inspection by the school standards regulator –Ofsted) or relatively strong. In the case of weak schools, individual school boards are generally known as academy local boards and will generally have no formal delegated powers. In the case of stronger schools, their boards are most likely to have certain powers, delegated by the board of trustees which will vary in their scope and range depending on the particular board. These arrangements are set out in a formal scheme of delegation which schools are mandated by the Department of Education to display on their website.” (Baxter, 2017b,p.4).

Previous project work in this area indicates that boards are looking to make sense of the governance challenges presented within MATs. Research in the north of England (Baxter, 2016), indicates that

information on school communities is often challenging to obtain given the dispersed nature of some MATS. It also indicated that information often appears to follow a hierarchical top down approach rather than feeding up through the organisation from the individual schools and their communities. In addition it also highlighted a sense of dissatisfaction from boards situated in individual schools, who voiced the opinion that information was imposed upon them rather than being solicited from them. This paper builds on that research to investigate how these new structures gain information from the numerous catchment areas under their jurisdiction and provides the basis for a further funded project (Leverhulme, 2017) into how this information flows throughout the organization.



Figure 2 (adapted from J. Baxter, 2017b)

### 3. The Narrative Approach: Methodology and Sample

Previous work into multi academy trusts has explored the ways in which strategy is understood by board members (Baxter, 2017a) and the key challenges for school board members in MATS (Baxter, Cornforth, & Stansfield, 20017). A key element within the role of board members was been identified in terms of sense making (see Baxter, 2016): how they make sense of complexity in their decision making processes and how this impacts on their roles and identities (Baxter, 2017b). Information is a key element of strategy making, yet what information is used within it and how individuals and boards choose which information to use and which to ignore remains unclear. As in the field of policy making, there are many sources of information that may be employed as a basis of decision making, yet the rationale for which of these sources boards and individuals use when making important policy decisions is a complex amalgam which in part is dependent on individual experience and identity and part dependent on the extent to which they identify with the organization, its values and ethos (See Baxter, 2017b).

Having successfully adopted the narrative approach in other research, specifically in the investigation of board member identities, it falls to this paper to analyse to what extent the method can be used to explore a particular part of strategy making, investigating conceptions of the differing sources of community information which feed into the process within a multi-level hierarchical organization such as a MAT.

This paper is premised on the idea of a strategy as practice approach to strategic decision making in MATs in which (McDonnell, 2017).

*“The narrative view of strategy stresses how language is used to construct meaning, it explores the ways that organizational stakeholders create a discourse of direction (whether about becoming being, or having been) to understand and influence one another’s actions. Whereas traditional strategy frameworks virtually ignore the role of language in strategic decision making, a narrative approach assumes that telling of strategy fundamentally influence strategic choice and action, often in unconscious ways.” (Barry & Elmes, 1997,p:5).*

Yet for some reason for a number of years the narrative view of strategy has largely been negated in favour of other approaches (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2005). More recently narrative approaches have seen a resurgence, particularly in the field of strategy as practice (Fenton & Langley, 2011; Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, & Vaara, 2010). Drawing from literature, much of it in the field of health and social care, the strengths of the narrative approach are highlighted as having the capacity to highlight the moral, intellectual and creative struggles being played out as individuals go about their sense making activities.(Golant & Sillince, 2007; Slay & Smith, 2011). My previous research in this area revealed a conflicted often confused approach to how each level within multi-level structures actively seeks out and uses particular sources of information in order to aid its strategic decision making (Baxter, 2016(J. Baxter et al., 20017)). However it also illustrated that particular sources of information are often privileged over others, and raised questions around why multi –level boards seek out and privilege certain sources of information over others. For example, statistical information is used a great deal in informing strategy. The work also identified that some sources of information appear to have greater legitimacy than others.

Information about school communities is vital in defining the direction of the MAT, the focus of its curriculum and any plans it may have to expand (Baxter et al., 2017) and for this reason it forms the basis of this particular strand of a much larger project.

The narrative approach in other research projects in order to obtain a more holistic view of the ways in which the ways in which, “the apparently independent and disconnected elements of existence are seen as related parts of a whole” (Polkinghorne, 1988,p:36). In so doing I also draw on Linde’s coherence system ‘a discursive practice that represents a system of beliefs and relations between beliefs; it provides the environment in which one statement may or may not be taken as the cause of another statement” (Linde, 1993,p.163).This paper explores its application in a very particular element of strategy – sources of information on school communities, in order to identify what type of information on communities is used in decision making processes of boards, and why. The school community in this paper is defined as the area from which pupils are drawn. In the case of MATs – the subject of this paper- it pertains to the often numerous communities which make up the MAT.

### **The basis of a narrative approach**

As Jerome Bruner argues, “*Human beings understand the world in two very different ways,*” (Bruner, 1991). The first he calls paradigmatic mode of thought – in this mode the individual seeks to comprehend experience in terms of “tightly reasoned analyses, logical proof and empirical observation, in the second, the so called ‘narrative mode of thought, the individual is concerned with human wants, needs and goals.(Bruner, 1991,p.22). “Principles and procedures learned in one domain do not automatically transfer to other domains,” (ibid, p.2). He places great emphasis on narrative as an indicator of the multitude of discourses that the narrator taps into, exemplifying this as follows:

*."An individual's working intelligence is never "solo." It cannot be understood without taking into account his or her reference books, notes, computer programs and data bases, or most important of all, the network of friends, colleagues, or men- tors on whom one leans for help and advice. Your chance of winning a Nobel*

*Prize, Harriet Zuckerman once told me, increases immeasurably if you have worked in the laboratory of somebody who has already won one, not because of pull but because of access to the ideas and criticisms of those who know better. (ibid, p.4)*

An important element within the narrative is that unlike the constructions generated by logical and scientific procedures that can be weeded out by falsification, “narrative constructions can only achieve *verisimilitude*.” Narratives, then, are a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and “narrative necessity” rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness.” (P, 5). Bruner also outlined what he saw as the then features of narrative. These are illustrated in figure 3 below.



Figure 3 10 elements of narrative analysis /composition, adapted from Bruner 1991.

Figure 3 helps to explain why so many strategy as practice researchers have turned to narrative to analyse the complex micro processes involved in strategy making.

As a number of strategy as practice researchers have pointed out, research over recent years has, “mainly focused on the visible part of the iceberg: people, events and explicit tools. The actual practice in itself, which involves a ‘constant parsing out of the individual the local and the societal has not yet been sufficiently investigated (Whittington, 2011, p.185 in Ines de la Ville & Mounoud, 2015).

In so doing, practices such as information sourcing are, “Construed as social skills that have been culturally acquired, hence unconsciously absorbed and embodied.” (ibid: 249). These social practices link strongly to identity (a key focus within this project but not covered within this paper), in which: “Social practices are identity –forming and strategy setting activities. The provide individuals with resources to interpret and improvise their role; they shape the scope and extent of their exploratory

activities and initiatives to cope with the ongoing flow of organizational development. (Chia & Holt, 2006).

As the illustration in figure 3 suggest, the narrative approach permits insights into the ways in which individuals and groups constitute their world –narrative truth is how they go about their practices (see 6 referentiality). It also encourages narrative tools such as metaphor to be examined as pointers into the social worlds of the interlocutor, exploring how they are used to form conceptual metaphor themes (Goatly, 2007,p.15). These groups of metaphors which may occur throughout a narrative offer some indication of the thinking behind particular practices, such as for example, information sourcing. They also give an indication of the persuasive force behind certain modes of thinking and certain practices, an element which has been extensively researched in the work of George Lakoff (Lakoff, 1991; Lakoff, 1992; Lakoff, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). As Bruner points out, there is agency in narrative, whilst it is driven by external discourses- discourse which have formed diachronically and exert powerful influences on individuals within organizational setting (Bruner, 1991), narratives are also replete with resistance discourses which may rail against the prevailing discourse to form alternative norms or ways of approaching practice. These norms created by narratives also come to represent cultural legitimacy as well as historical and traditional modus operandi (see figure 3 sections 8 and 10).

The relationship between teller and told is inherent within narrative analysis, whether textual or orated, the teller has a particular message for the told and the told in turn has a particular way of interpreting this message. Narrative truths may be negotiated between researcher and participant and are thus tied up with the identities of both. (Baxter, 2016 ). When researchers seek to understand underlying factors influencing actors choices, narrative explanations offer far richer sources than attempting to define causal explanations: As Jane Elliot describes: “*where narrative explanations remain rooted within the particular, causal explanations aim for applicability beyond the individual case- this has been termed the distinction between ideographic and nomeothetic explanations* .”(Elliot, 2005,p.99). Given that previous research has identified that the whole issue of which sources of information are actually used within strategy making is largely subjective, varying from board to board, from individual to individual (Rogers, Jiang, Rogers, & Intindola, 2016)-, the narrative method is likely to yield insights into the ways in which boards approach this task rather than suggesting that this sample of 4 trusts can be generalised across England. However these context rich insights, located within specific cultural and educational genre are also capable of offering insight into some of the challenges faced by individuals and boards in locating and using particular sources of information. As these insights are part of narratives of role that individuals create, narratives that centre upon this particular task within their role and own identification of that role are likely to offer rich insights (W. Labov & Waletzky, 1997; W. a. D. F. Labov, 1977).

## Sample

The research is based on 30 semi structured interviews with school board members working in 4 multi academy trusts in areas of high socio economic deprivation. The interviews were carried out within the period 2014-2017. The interviews and were coded using Nvivo software and analysed using the framework in figure two. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour each (questions are located in appendix 01). The volunteers were initially recruited via a number of ‘gatekeepers’, namely local school organisations or board support organizations. The respondents were then self-selecting. The organizations that formed the sample included: a) 2 Multi academy trusts in the North of England and b) 2 Multi academy trusts in the South of England.

Returning to the table which featured in section b) the sample for this research was drawn as in table 1. Larger MATs were not chosen for this study as they represent additional levels of complexity. Funding provided from Leverhulme (gained) will address a larger, follow on study.

Descriptor	Sample	Size of MAT	Number of students (approx.)
Small	3(North) 2 (South)	1-5	1,200
Medium		6-15	5000
Large		16-30	12,000
Very Large		30+	12,000 +

#### 4. Findings and discussion

The research revealed several narratives around information and decision making, these were focused on:

- who provides the information for decision making
- what value and legitimacy is placed on differing sources of information and why.

##### Who provides the information for decision making?

Information for decision making unsurprisingly emanates from a number of sources both inside and outside of the organisation. Ofsted was a powerful source of information particularly in terms of strategic priorities and areas for improvement. Inspection reports produced by them were fundamental in terms of sourcing information. But these reports also created powerful discourses in terms of the ways in which board members thought about schools within the organization. However a recent report into inspection and accountability of MATs reported issues with the whole area of the accountability of MATS:

*“Ofsted and the DfE’s accountability measures diagnose quality, RSCs commission intervention, a contestable market delivers the intervention.” (HoCEC, 2017)*

The report raised the whole question of Ofsted’s capacity and capability to carry out inspections, at present they are not permitted to inspect the trust as a whole (from trustee performance downwards) but carry out what they term to be ‘batched inspections’ – inspections of several schools within the trust. But the same inquiry raised serious questions about the inspectorate’s ability to inspect governance stating:

*“In the final evidence session of this inquiry, Lord Nash told us that “it is not part of the skillset of HMI to analyse the finances or governance or organisation structure of a MAT”.<sup>26</sup> He went on to say that it was the EFA’s job to look at finances and governance, rather than Ofsted’s. Several MATs also took this view in their evidence. Oasis Community Learning agreed with Lord Nash by stating “that assessing the organisational effectiveness (infrastructure and governance of a charitable organisation) of a MAT is not within Ofsted’s skillset”.<sup>27</sup> Similarly Academies Enterprise Trust (AET) criticised Ofsted’s lack of understanding of governance structures. Despite this they did call for a formalised “transparent and agreed framework for inspection” of trusts”. (HoCEC, 2017, Section 26).*

Notwithstanding this, Ofsted judgements were powerful forms of information that influenced both how board members thought about the school and also about their own role within it as this board member stated:

*“Ofsted has always made us accountable hasn’t it, but certainly with including the governance in the leadership inspection of the criteria has meant that you have to be in a position where you know your school, don’t you? There is no fudging”  
(Board member – Academy Committee, 2015 South).*

However in some cases board members felt that the information provided by Ofsted was superficial and that it lacked context sensitivity and therefore that it lacked legitimacy and credibility as this board member reported:

*“I’m not wholly sure that Ofsted understand schools like ours in these [deprived] areas (Board member – Academy Committee, 2015 South).*

Previous research into questions board members ask reflected that high numbers of board members within academy trusts asked questions about accountability, looking to information provided by Ofsted as to what is expected of them (Baxter, 2016). However the information provided by Ofsted in inspection reports was lacking in terms of real understanding of schools. Board members placed a high premium on understanding communities served by the school and there was a narrative that indicated that Ofsted were not familiar enough with the particular challenges faced by particular schools and that this impacts on the information they provide- particularly in terms of its credibility.

Other sources of information included parent governors (although there were caveats around this, see next section); official documentation such as The School Governors Handbook (DFE, 2014), Ofsted parent view; twitter; facebook groups; the head teacher; the senior leadership team; the chair of governors; Local Leaders of Governance; Governor support organisations (such as the National Governance Association); fellow governors; teachers; surveys and other school staff and visits to individual schools.

There was little evidence to suggest that Regional School Commissioners were thought of as sources of community knowledge, even though they are regionally based and should, given their remit, have some local knowledge.

The head teacher was identified as a good source of knowledge, however this tended to be head teachers of local schools rather than the executive head, responsible for the oversight of the MAT. Other board members, those from communities in which schools are based, were drawn upon to provide local knowledge, and teachers working in those communities were also thought to be a valuable source of local knowledge. It was not clear from this research however, how academy local boards – boards made up largely from parents were used to inform strategy within the MAT, nor was it clear to what extent their local knowledge was drawn upon. There was however a good deal of discussion about the information given to academy local boards, this tends to suggest that the top down dissemination of information is more of a focus than the soliciting of bottom up information on communities.

Nor was not possible to say how regularly these resources were drawn upon, nor the exact specifics of their contribution.

Training and development events were thought to be good sources of networking and learning the specifics of the job, but yielded little in the way of knowledge of school communities. They were often criticised for being too removed from actual practices of governing.

School visits were thought to be very informative in terms of getting to know the demands of particular communities, however trustees reflected that this was more difficult for them as this function was nearly always performed by local governing bodies or academy committees, as this trustee reported:

*“I’m not as involved in the day to day life of the school that I would like to be, if you know what I mean. There’s sort of ‘getting to know you’ type of things as well as your visiting with purpose, school visit thing are not quite happening and you feel a bit isolated” (Trustee, South, 2016).*

Although there appeared to be some formal reporting in terms of individual school boards reporting into trustees, this was formalised around staff roles rather than governors. In a few cases the information communication was ad hoc or centred upon a few board members who fulfilled the role of trustee and local board /local committee member.

### Value, legitimacy and trust.

As the previous section indicated, in order for information to be used by boards it must attain a certain level of credibility and legitimacy. Although training and development was mentioned, a common narrative amongst board members was the need to acquire information on the job, this included knowledge of schools and their communities as this board member explains:

*For me it was touchy-feely as I went along.....[....] It is very much ... this sounds awful, it is very much making it up as you go along for the first couple of months, until you find your feet. There are a lot of people, and I see it now, who come to governors meetings for the first time, they sit in absolute silence for the first three meetings, because there is no direction, you are not given a job description, you are not told this is what you should do, sort of like tactical and this is the strategy over the next five years. It is very much around sitting down there, trying to understand what the expectation of that governing body is and of the school. But you are not told that directly. (Board member – Parent Governor – South, 2015).*

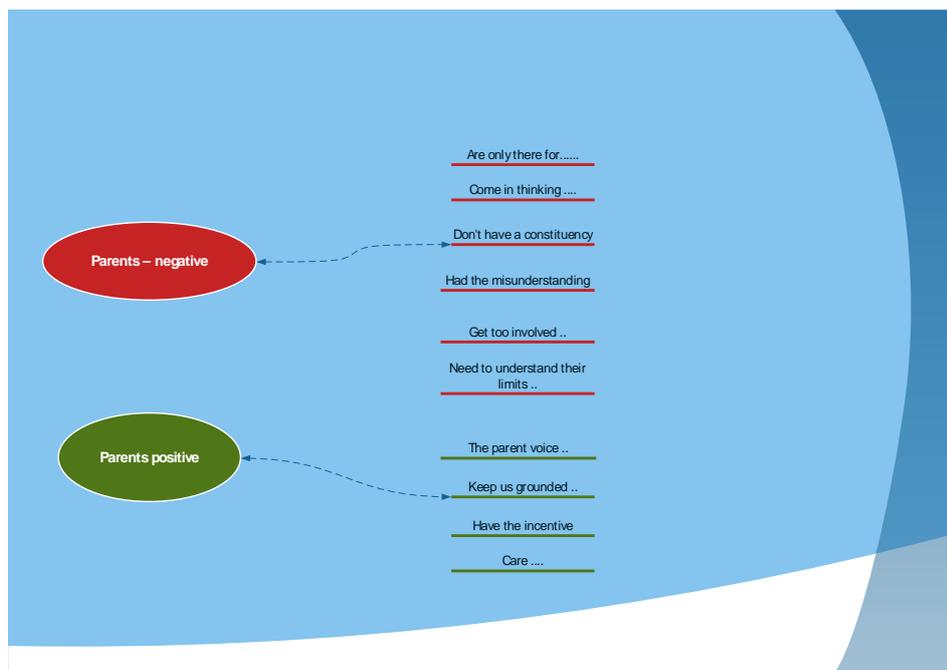
There was a sense that this form of learning had legitimacy and that learning on the job is a robust way to approach the work

*“You know, any, there’s no substitute for learning on the job, and it’s a bit like an apprenticeship, isn’t it?” (Board member – North, 2015)*

Powerful metaphors linked to learning on the job, such as ‘apprenticeship’ ‘touchy feely’ ‘coming in from the cold’ and ‘learning the language’ created strong cultural narratives suggesting that school culture can be difficult to penetrate. The narratives were also suggestive of an apprenticeship- something that is undertaken in collaboration with ‘wiser’ role models who offer some advice and guidance. There was little mentioned about who exactly provided this ‘wise council’ but some board members suggested this might be the chair, whilst others appeared to feel that this council came from a number of sources – that it was a community of practice that formed and shaped individual governors and that learning and sources of information infused the community and lent credibility to the role and board. This is an interesting finding given the considerable amount of research that indicates that the chair and headteachers are instrumental in providing knowledge and information that informs decision making (Baxter, 2016; James et al., 2012; Wilkins, 2014).

In terms of formal training and development there was a sense that this provided guidance on the role but no indication that it provided information for decision making purposes. However this was not a question that was directly asked of board members and one that this study has highlighted as fruitful ground for further research.

There was a strong sense of the legitimacy of certain information and a lack of legitimacy of other types. For example, the parent who appeared to make demands on the part of their children/child was completely negated in terms of credibility even though the demand may be based on information that was equally applicable to other students and important for the board to consider. A wordsmith search for the word parent returned results that illustrate how the word is collocated with negative connotations throughout the narratives, some of them are illustrated in figure 3 below.



**Figure 3 Words associated with parent information /board members.**

As the diagram illustrates, information/input by parent governors is very often associated with negative narratives around lack of impartiality, there as token representation, of limited usefulness, whilst more positive narratives tend to be around their capacity to ‘ground’ the board and their vested interest and care about what happens to pupils. It was out of scope for this study to probe further in this area and particularly to investigate whether ‘caring’ and ‘vested interest’ was related to particular schools or to the organization (the MAT) as a whole. It is also interesting to note that there is considerable discussion and tension around whether MATs should be obliged to have parent governors on trustee boards. The recent White Paper sought to withdraw this as mandatory, but the government subsequently did a u turn and at the time of writing, MATs are still obliged to have parent governor representation on MAT boards. It is also interesting to note that advisory committees based in individual schools are largely made up of parents. This may or may not be a reflection of the narrative highlighted in red in figure 3 that would tend to indicate a lack of legitimacy and credibility of information provided by parents in this role.

However the research did reveal that boards are actively seeking to incorporate information from parents in other ways – such as parent surveys, parent meetings and other mechanisms. This is certainly an area that needs further investigation in the follow on project.

The final area that appeared during the investigations was the idea of ‘trusted information’. What kind of information could be trusted and which sources of information could be trusted. The whole area of organizational collaboration is rife with issues around trust (Cullen, Johnson, & Sakano, 2000), yet as collaboration researchers Huxham and Vangen report , “*Rather than describing situations in which collaborative actions are underpinned by trust, people tell us about misuse of power, hostility between members and about collaborative situations generally characterized by suspicion and mistrust* (Huxham & Vangen, 2013,p.153). As they point out, there is a vast literature which researches trust, particularly in collaborative activities, yet in terms of the vast structural changes to English education since 2010, yet apart from some work done in the field of multi-agency working, of which schools are a part, there has been little work done on this fundamental area when it comes to MATs. This is particularly surprising given that many schools are given little choice but to collaborate if they are deemed to be failing. Yet as this paper has pointed out, these collaborations are not necessarily a panacea for improved performance.

## 5. Conclusions and implications for future research: contribution to knowledge.

This study looked at sources of community information used by board members in multi-academy trusts in England. It also investigated the use and efficacy of narrative analysis for this very specific research question. The study succeeded in identifying sources of community knowledge as the findings reported. However this could well have been done using quantitative methods, or questionnaires. In this sense the narrative approach did not yield any particular advantages for the study. However in investigating which of these sources of information appeared to hold most credibility with board members, the narrative analysis proved fruitful, offering rich insights into the extent to which particular sources of information were seen to be more legitimate and credible than others. This was achieved in a number of ways: in analysing the coherence between certain metaphors used by more than one participant, it was possible to see that certain ideas, such as the issue with parent board members, tended to be part of a wider discourse around the professionalism of board members within MATs. As section 1 reported, the government have placed considerable emphasis on the recruitment of individuals who possess particular professional skillsets. Although this is not to say that these individuals may not be parents as well as professionals, the democratic representative role of parents has most certainly been undermined within recent government papers (HoCEC, 2017), and the role of the community representative was severely undermined by the Trojan Horse Affair in 2014 when a number of Muslim board members were accused of pushing a hard line Muslim agenda in certain Birmingham Schools (Baxter, 2014; Parliament, 2015). The fallout from the affair instigated a number of investigations by Ofsted into other community schools who were subsequently accused of similar transgressions (Adams, 2014).

The study revealed that community knowledge is however still valued in MATs with metaphors such as 'front line', 'reality check' and working at the 'chalk face' used to reflect the necessity of this type of knowledge, along with its credibility. However this appears to fly in the face of the rather derogatory tone taken when this knowledge emanates from parent board members, as section 4 reported.

The narrative approach offered insights into the extent to which decision making and information is tied into the identities of board members. Phrases such as 'giving something back' or 'serving the community' appeared with regularity throughout the narratives. This tended to indicate that the identity strand of this work may well be more fruitful than attempts on my part, to parse individual elements within the strategy making process from others. For me it indicated that investigating strategy making from an identity perspective and employing narrative methods to do this, may well offer more insights into the demanding challenges of strategizing in such complex organisations. Through the sense making activities of individuals the narrative form has the power to, "produce a chronological account of creating strategy whilst also illuminating the meaning of this work in the lives of the participants (W. Labov & Waletzky, 1997). It may also shed more light on why certain information sources are privileged over others. Why for example a business person from a particular community may hold more sway over strategic decisions than a parent from the same community, or why information provided by a recently appointed headteachers about a school community may hold more sway than that of a teacher who has lived and worked within that community for many years.

The narrative approach also yielded an important yet unanticipated finding relating to trust. As section 4 reports, the whole area of trust in MATs is fundamental yet under researched. This is particularly so in terms of how schools within the organization communicate and share information. Researchers in the field of collaborative working (Cullen et al., 2000; Das & Teng, 1998; Emsley & Kidon, 2007), emphasise that information is used as part of the power play between collaborating organizations. In the case of MATs not all schools are eager to become part of these organizations, and even if they are this is not to say that they will be willing to relinquish all power to parent organizations and boards. These structures, as figure one illustrates, are rapidly growing, the present government (Conservative under Prime Minister May) is keen to see all schools be absorbed into them (*Educational excellence*

everywhere 2016), yet with little thought as to how this will operationalise and in particular, what work will need to be done in order to ensure that trust is established between the different organizations within the MAT. The follow on work into strategy creation in MATs funded by Leverhulme will need to incorporate this vital element to investigate how these boards are functioning and deciding on strategy and strategic growth.

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