Strategy as learning in Multi Academy Trusts in England: Strategic thinking in action

Abstract
Multi-Academy trusts are groups of schools in England led by an Executive Head Teacher and a board of Trustees. High profile failures of these organizations raise questions over the way they are strategically led. Leadership studies across the public sector argue that the absence of strategic thinking is a major detractor from performance & sustainability (Davies and Davies, 2004). However, creating strategy for a single organization is very different to creating it for a collaboration. This article adopts a schema-based approach to examine the ways in leadership boards approach strategy as a learning activity. Drawing on 42 qualitative interviews it asks: a) What evidence is there that strategy is a learning activity b) What organizational implications are there for this? c) What are the implications of this for Trustee and CEO development in this area? d) What theoretical contribution does this study make to what is known about strategy learning in multi-level organisations. The paper concludes that there is evidence to suggest that respondents view strategy as learning, whilst also suggesting areas for professional development for school leaders. From a theoretical perspective the paper adds to knowledge on the role of metacognition in a strategy as learning approach to strategic decision making.

Background
Over the last three decades, the move from bureaucratic forms of governing to networked governance, combined with the adoption of New Public Management techniques, has radically altered the ways in which the public sector is led and managed (Newman and Clarke, 2009). Decentralization and deconcentration policies have been employed by governments in order to improve services and solve seemingly intractable problems. Multi-Academy trusts (MATs) are the British Government’s response to solving entrenched problems in English education and to decentralize its governance. MATs are groups or federations of state funded, autonomous schools that have grouped together for a variety of reasons. These groupings are unique to the English system of education, although different forms of school groupings can be found in the United States as Charter Management organizations (Wohlstetter et al, 1995). Developed by the Labour Government under Tony Blair, they were established by the Learning and Skills Act, 2000. The policy was embraced by then Education Secretary Michael Gove, and in 2010 the Academies Act (Parliament, 2010), greatly strengthened the powers of the Department for Education, in mandating underperforming schools to join MATs. This policy was also accompanied by the introduction of Regional Schools’ Commissioners, individuals targeted with converting
The Government has taken steps to improve underperforming schools by converting them to academy status and bringing them under the control of high performing MATs (Parliament, 2016). In November 2017 there were over 20,100 state-funded schools in England, of which 6,100 were academies, of which 1,668 were stand-alone academies and 4,432 schools were in MATs. They may be small, numbering 3-5 schools or far larger, encompassing over 50 schools (DfE, 2018).

One of the most intractable problems in English education is the achievement gap between the economically advantaged and disadvantaged (Francis, 2011), and the failure of many poor schools to be able to improve: MATs were designed to counter this, but one of the key challenges for these large and complex organizations is the ability of governing boards – Trustees and CEOs, at the apex of the organization to create strategy that will best serve school communities and maximise pupil attainment. But, as the literature on multi-level governance in both the public and not-for-profit sector reveals (Cornforth, 2012), providing strategic direction for several organisations, which may also be widely geographically dispersed, creates considerable challenge for those responsible for setting the strategic direction of the organisation. This funded research builds on our previous research and papers in this area, (Baxer and Floyd, 2019), and draws on data from interviews with Trustees and CEOs. It employs a theoretical framework which views strategy as a learning and narrative practice and builds on work done by Casey and Goldman (2010), which introduces the idea of strategic thinking in action. In so doing it looks to respond to the research questions: a) What evidence is there that strategy is a learning activity b) What organizational implications are there for this? c) What are the implications of this for Trustee and CEO development in this area? d) What theoretical contribution does this study make to what is known about strategy learning in multi-level organisations.

MATs: structure and circumstance

MATs vary in size and geographical spread, but whatever their size and scope, they possess hierarchical structures of governance. As figure 1 indicates, the board of Trustees is supplemented by several 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 (Baxer and Floyd, 2019).
When MATs take over new schools, they delegate certain powers to academy boards according to whether schools are perceived as weak, according to Ofsted, or relatively strong. In the case of weak schools, school level boards have few decision-making powers and are often subject to strict monitoring by trustee boards. In stronger schools, boards are likely to have greater delegated powers. These arrangements are set out in a ‘formal scheme of delegation which schools must display on their website’ (Baxter, 2019, p.4). MATs can include all phases of schooling (primary, secondary), but some MATs focus purely on a single phase of education – for example all primaries, or secondaries. MATs are now a key element within the English education system and understanding how CEOs and Trustees formulate strategy is vitally important in order to prevent the failures of such organisations—the result of which can be catastrophic for learners and local communities (HMSO, 2017)

Theoretical Framework: strategy as learning - strategic thinking in action

There is a strong literature that views strategy as a learning activity, a view of strategy that largely employs qualitative data to analyse the micro processes and activities of actors concerned with devising and implementing strategy (Casey et al, 2010), Chia and Holt argue that strategy is a practical coping mechanism (2009), a sensemaking activity in which, ‘events, entities and meaning help compose one another, (p.640) and in which individuals constantly modify their behaviour and actions in relation to shared practices and understandings. Due to the importance of strategic thinking in the long term success of both public and private enterprises, and its conceptualisation as a ‘long term systems orientated and opportunistic approach’ (Casey and Goldman, 2010: 169); it is viewed as a key skill in organisational leadership and governance (Mackay and Burt, 2015). Where an organisation is both multi-site and multi layered, the act and processes of strategy learning are hypercomplex, yet none the less vital to organizational resilience and success (Leavy, 1998).
Our previous research into board strategizing in multi-academy trusts (Baxter and Floyd, 2019), supported the idea of strategy as an emergent phenomenon, whilst also emphasizing the sense making, practical coping aspects that appear as a leitmotif in Chia and Holt’s work (2006). It challenged Bourgeois’ distinction between what strategy (success and failure of various strategies) and how a particular strategy emerges (Bourgeois, 1980) arguing, that as a learning activity the two are inextricably interwoven. In this sense it supports the findings of Minzberg (1991,) in bringing together strategic thinking with strategy formulation and implementation : ‘the formulation and execution of strategic strategies......[..] basically covers all attributes that can be labelled strategic.’ (33). Minzberg argues that there is a distinct difference between strategic planning, which he sees as an analytical process aimed at programming already identified strategies, and strategic thinking which he argues, is a synthesizing process, utilizing intuition and creativity, the outcome of which is an integrated perspective of the enterprise. This view is partially reflected in the strategy as learning, emergent view of strategy as practice (Johnson, 2008). But Minzberg’s opinion that formal planning and processes tend to drive out strategic thinking, constraining innovation, does not align with our previous research into strategy in MATS, which illustrated that planning processes can encourage strategic thinking, operating as a helpful frameworks for progress.

Casey and Goldman’s work (2010) looked to resolve what they viewed as the dichotomous nature of the ways in which strategy making and strategic planning is conceptualized, arguing that the term strategic thinking is often used interchangeably with strategy (p:168). They resolve this by conceptualizing strategic thinking, together with strategy formulation, as ‘strategic thinking in action’ (STA) (P:168), bringing together the three literatures of, strategy, learning and cognition in order to integrate these perspectives-illustrated in Figure 2. Their model includes four key elements: Scanning, questioning, testing and conceptualizing. In this model they conceptualize strategy as learning, highlighting the fact that there is little research into how individuals ‘develop their ability to think strategically’ (ibid:171). They argue that strategic thinking occurs on several levels : That it is: conceptual-develops concepts that can then be applied to different situations; systems orientated- that it involves not just the organization but the system in which it is situated; directional – it aims for a desired future state; and finally, that it is opportunistic and a learning activity (ibid;172).

In our earlier research into governing boards, (Baxter, 2016) we found Weik’s sensemaking framework (Weik, 2001) combined with a constructivist approach to learning (Piaget, 1954), to be helpful in understanding some of the challenges faced by boards who had moved from being a single school, to part of a MAT. As frameworks, relationships and cues are key to understanding the leadership/management function within organizations, Weik’s work has often been used in relation to strategy and strategic thinking, due to its capacity to provide a connection between cognition and actions (Narayanan et al., 2011) and its links to identity formation (Oliver, 2015). The process of sensemaking involves the integration of stimuli (information) into sensemaking frameworks or schema this then connects with
constructivist and social theories of learning (Johnston, 1995; McVee et al., 2005). Constructivism is based on the idea that knowledge and learning are socially constructed, and that learning depends on individual and collective agency to critically question environmental cues and reflect on these in relation to their own knowledge. In this sense the learning is transformative, as it changes the perspective of the learner in such a way that it also infuses and develops their identity (Mezirow, 1998:14), explains the integration of new learning as: "the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings" (P. 14). This in essence is the basis of metacognition. In the next section we explore how this thinking is conceptualised.

Schema Based strategy as learning.

The term schema was first used by Bartlett in 1932 in relation to his work on perceptual experience (Taylor, 1981), since then it has been widely adopted by over 150 researchers in the field of social psychology (p:91). A schema is understood to be a way of information processing based on an existing framework or concept of the phenomenon under question. For example, an individual joining a school board, will have some sense of what a school board is and how it functions, this information will be used to make sense of the functionality of such a board. Schema are key to sensmaking in so far as they ‘lend structure to experience’ (ibid:94). One of the most powerful elements within sense making is its capacity to embrace the diversity of the situations in which the schema are employed: for example, an experienced Chair of Trustees may have formed many schema in the context of their professional world, when they apply these to an educational/school setting, they may require radical alteration in order to fit the situation in which they now find themselves. In terms of strategy as learning, the idea of self-efficacy is important. This was explored initially by Bandura in terms of social cognitive theory, the main premise of which, is that when individuals transform their knowledge and abilities into action, the transformation is mediated by their belief in their capacity to transform (Bandura, 2000). It is important in relation to strategy as learning, as it has been found to link with: ‘persistence in the face of obstacles; effective control of thoughts that focus on attention to self rather than task; a perception of the environment as controllable; likelihood of setting higher goals and remaining committed to them for longer periods and the increased ability to visualize the future in terms of scenarios of success rather than failure.’(Bandura, 1977a: :134).

Schwantdt’s (2005) comparison of sensmaking with learning theory points out that although sensmaking subscribes to the social construction of reality, it stops short of the constructionists requirement for the reflection and critical inquiry necessary for transformational change (Schwantdt, 2005: :185) Schein, (2010), integrates this perspective with the work of Minzberg (1985), Kolb (2005) and Casey and Goldman (2010) in order to offer a way to evaluate to what extent strategy is a learning activity and, to what extent individuals are aware of it as such.
On this basis we argue that the four activities of strategy as learning: Scanning, testing, questioning and conceptualizing are based on existing schema and that in order to adapt these schemas to the new and challenging context of multi-organizational work, those responsible for strategy making, must understand the metacognitive elements of their work. This effectively means that in order to think strategically in a manner that is: ‘conceptual, systems orientated, direction and opportunistic,’ (Casey and Goldman, 2010: :169), they need to acknowledge that their work is in effect, a learning activity.

In order to do this we respond to the questions mentioned earlier, we examine how the three elements: factual knowledge-on the whole organizations as well as its parts, procedural and conceptual knowledge and metacognitive knowledge, work together to effect strategy as learning in a multi-academy trust organization. In so doing we use schema as key elements within our analytical framework.

Method and approach

The research is based on 42 semi structured interviews with Trustees and CEOs working in 8 MATs: Chosen due to their decision-making powers for the whole trust (Sample located in Appendix 01.) The CEO is the operational lead of the MAT and sits on the MAT board. The MATS are situated in the North (6) and South of England (3). They are not able to be identified due to confidentiality issues. The interviews were carried out within the period December 2017 to June 2019, lasting 45 minutes to one hour each and carried out via skype, in person and by phone.

The research gained approval from the ethics committees of the university. Informed consent protocols were drawn up and approved by respondents before interviews commenced. Due to the sensitive nature of this research, this included anonymity of trusts as well as individuals.

The interviews were coded using NVivo software and analysed using the framework in figure 2. Data analysis considered key themes emerging from both documentary analysis and interview data. Having successfully adopted the narrative approach in other research which investigates strategic discourse in MATs, and sense making on governing boards (Baxter forthcoming, 2016a, Baxter 2017, ) we use it draw together ‘the apparently independent and disconnected elements of existence into related parts of a whole’ (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Using this approach in the analysis, allowed for the storifying elements of strategy making, inherent within the schematic approach, whilst also allowing for some insights into how individuals view their STA Casey and Goldman (2010). Transcripts were then compared and contrasted across the data sets and to the study’s conceptual framework. This method has been used in explorations of strategy as communication when exploring the extent to which actors defend certain strategic positions, account for or dis-align from an action (page, 369); as such it offers insight into the drive behind adherence to a certain course of action. The webpages of the MATs were included in the documentary analysis, again these were scrutinized for their strategic goals, missions, values and stated aims.
In line with the narrative approach, we set out our findings in relation to the discussion, in order to create clarity and coherence for the reader (Young, 1989; Patterson, 2002). This approach is also employed throughout the sense making and strategy as narrative literature (Patriotta, 2003).

Analytical framework

In order to examine the three areas of knowledge identified by Minzberg (1987) and supported by Casey and Goldman (2010), we assume that factual knowledge - knowledge on the whole organizations as well as its parts (Mintzberg (1987:4)) - is a key element in procedural and conceptual knowledge, due to the selective processing work of a schema-based approach. We therefore include factual knowledge as a taken for granted element of all four schemata. The four schemas investigate the ways in which different elements come together to form the procedural and conceptual knowledge of strategy and are illustrated in Figure 2

![Figure 2 Schema as procedural, conceptual and factual knowledge adapted from Harris, 1994:312-313](image)

The first: **Person Schemas**, involves the individual’s impressions of particular groups and their function in strategizing: This also includes beliefs about individual’s responsibilities in terms of this activity. The second category - **organisation schemas** - is important in that it reflects beliefs about the culture of the organization. As the literature on organizational culture reflects, this is particularly pertinent when thinking about new collaborations between organizations, when the assumption of equality (as in the case of multiple schools
coming together), reinforces existing identities, adding complexity to stakeholder contributions to strategizing (Zaheer et al., 2003); **Object /concept schemas** relate to material objects or texts that inform beliefs about organizational values and purpose: In this case they may be strategy documents and plans, websites, news articles about the trust, mission statements and so forth. The final schema category is that of **events**: This relates to particular events in which schema are created and challenged, such as meetings, formal development opportunities or strategy days. The category, **metacognitive knowledge** (Pintrich, 2002) is investigated as a separate category within the research. As reflective observation in action and critical reflection on action are key elements in a cycle of reflection and action, the extent to which individuals recognise strategy as a learning activity is key to the development of our understanding of strategy as learning. Figure 4 illustrates how metacognitive knowledge and activity contribute to three areas within strategy making.

![Figure 3 Metacognition adapted from Pintrich, 2002](image)

**Findings and discussion**

In common with other research that adopts narrative analysis, we combine the findings with discussion, in order to create a cohesive examination of the data in relation to our theoretical framework and research questions (Clough, 2002).

Learning for CEOs and Trustees took a number of forms, some formal and others less so, these are illustrated in figure 4 and discussed in relation to our theoretical framework in figure 3.
What evidence is there that strategy is a learning activity?

1. Person Schemas

The data illustrates that when it comes to person schemas, participants have firm ideas about who in the organization is responsible for strategizing. Although this is stated as a trustee duty in The Governor Guide to the Law, as being the responsibility of Trustees and CEO; a number of Trustees, including Chairs, saw this as a CEO responsibility, or at the very least, led by the CEO. Their premise for this thinking appeared to be that the CEO had a far greater knowledge of the school and its aspirations than they possess.

CEOs too, with 2 exceptions, appeared to think that they were responsible for setting out the direction of the organisation- to the extent that in one case, it appeared that the Trustees were little other than a rubberstamping committee, as this CEO reports:

So I write my Headteacher’s report and that goes to Governors and they say how’s it going, and I say really well thanks and they say, great, keep up the good work and then we all go home (CEO, MAT 3)

Trustees tended overall to defer to the CEO and Chair of the organization in order to do this work, for example, horizon scanning, and education policy were seen as knowledge gathering activities that were out of scope for other Trustees, as this trustee reports:

The chief executive, and the chairman of the trust board are very good at giving us horizon scanning information (Trustee-MAT5)
CEO’s within our sample, felt largely that up to them to set the strategy and to create an organization that mirrored their own values. (CEO 1, 3, 6). This recognition of the fact that as CEO they have absolute power, is concerning, due to the implicit notion that if the CEO chose, they could ignore the board. Other CEO’s in the study were less forthcoming about the role of the board in strategic thinking, one implied that the board lacked the knowledge to think strategically, stating, ‘they don’t really understand the field.’ (CEO, MAT 02).

Examination of the data implies that boards do see themselves as engaging in strategic thinking in action, but lack some of the vital elements. For example, they see the questioning element of the work as key to their role, yet the scanning they appear to leave to the CEO. There was also concern that the board’s capacity for strategic thinking was constrained by the fact that they were not able to draw effectively on local information in their strategic thinking and processes, this is also, to a certain extent, reflected in two other papers from the same project (see Baxter & Floyd, 2019 and Baxter and Cornforth, 2018):

I think that everyone needs to be clear that the Trustees are commissioning the local governing bodies to do their work at the local level [...] getting the views and ensuring influence around stakeholder views and perspectives (Chair of Trustees- MAT 07).

Organization schemas

This category refers to the culture of STA within an organization. This is an interesting category in terms of collaborations, as it implies a single culture. One of the many criticisms of MATs is that many try to impose one way of operating, on all schools, regardless. So do Trustees and CEO consider the impact of their strategic thinking, on all schools in the trust?

The responses within this category illustrated that individuals were only just realising the potential scope for their organization’s strategic development; supporting Casey and Goldman’s argument that STA is ‘conceptual-develops concepts that can then be applied to different situations; systems orientated- that it involves not just the organization but the system: But it is the opportunistic element of the strategic thinking which comes across most strongly, as this trustee reflects: ‘Why not have a broad approach. If your core is your year one, age 3 to 19, why stop at that when councils here are shutting down adult provision (Trustee-MAT 5). This broadening out of STA to consider not just the organisation but the system, powerfully illustrates a major shift in thinking for trustee boards; thinking in that it is opportunistic in recognising gaps in provision and agentive enough to feel that as an organization, there are opportunities attached to this.

The climate in which schools are operating in England has been increasingly difficult since the Conservative Government came to power in 2015. Since then 91% of state schools have had their funding cut. (https://schoolcuts.org.uk/). This has meant that many financially weaker schools have been directed to join MATs in order to remain open (Simon et al., 2019). The pressure for MATs to take on failing schools is substantial: Regional Schools’ Commissioners (Parliament, 2016), are targeted with brokering failing schools into MATs. They are also responsible for re-brokering schools from failed MATs (Nye, 2015). This appears to be having 2 interesting effects on strategic thinking: The first, is that it seems to be pushing Trustees to use strategic plans and organizational knowledge in order to resist
imposed growth plans, by RSCs; the second effect is that in MATs that lack a sense of being in control of their destiny, Trustees feel less able to resist the considerable pressures to expand placed upon them. From a strategy as learning perspective this is important as this research indicates that boards that lack knowledge of where their organization sits within the wider system are constrained in their strategic thinking in action.

The final element within this category involved Trustees drawing upon their professional knowledge in order to think strategically about their MAT. This was not always successful, as one trustee put it, ‘we are not producing baked beans, we are dealing with education,’ (MAT-4). The tendency to apply private sector understandings to education was clearly problematic: frustrating for both CEOs and fellow Trustees, particularly when the individuals appeared to cling to notions that, in the particular case of MATs, were completely redundant, as one CEO put it, ‘it may work in the case of xxx industry, but it isn’t appropriate here.’ (CEO – MAT-8).

Object Concept schemas

It was clear from the research that many of the respondents drew on strategic plans and website information for their accounts of strategic thinking in action. Yet strategic plans were not always available to view – even though they are public documents, they were often not placed on the website, and inquiries as to how to get hold of them, were in the case of two MATs, refused. In the case of one MAT, there was clearly no plan in place, and examining the website and attempts to reconnect with the respondent (010319), were in vain. However, the interview did pick up on the fact that their plans to expand and strategic thinking tended to be premised on an assumption that if they did not begin to take on schools, they risked being, ‘swallowed up by a predatory MAT.’ Plans were also used to frame discussions with Trustees and as part of the development processes. As this trustee points out: ‘It focuses us[Trustees] on the bigger picture [....]’ (Trustee- MAT 2). Another trustee pointed out how they used them to help to learn and to reflect on the learning, ‘At the back of our minds, we are desperate to expand for the right reasons, while being cognisant about what the risks is: That’s why we feel it’s a good time to simply look at [the plan] to reflect on what has worked as well and what can we learn from it. (Trustee-MAT 3).

Event schemas

As Casey and Goldman point out, organizations make many attempts to formally train staff and Trustees in strategy making, via, for example: away days, formal training events and by organising meetings. These events create communities of practice that can be very influential in shaping strategic thinking through the influence members exert on one another, as well as the ‘expert’ input (Wenger, 2007). CEOs within the sample had ready made communities of practice as this Chair reports:

There’s the heads network clearly but there’s, you know, heads of maths and heads of English and heads of science. They all meet up on the regular basis. (Trustee-MAT 02). For Trustees the picture was very different, many referred to their ‘day job’ or previous career (if retired), as powerful communities of practice, which, over a period of time, had
clearly built very firm event schemas within which to conceptualise strategic thinking in action. This in some respects, appeared on the surface to be useful, but on closer analysis, the transcripts revealed that there was a good deal of ‘strategic grafting work’ going on: In other words, Trustees were making sense of their MAT strategy using the same concepts and schema that were created in very different cultural and contextual settings. This was particularly true of those working in the for-profit sector. These individuals tended to see education as a product in a competitive marketplace and worked according to cost benefit analysis and market force thinking, proving challenging for some CEOs to accept.

Metacognition

In terms of metacognition, all but one of the Trustees interviewed, viewed STA as a learning activity, experiential in nature. As this trustee reports:

You can take a look at the tensions and you can think, oh god, yes. Or you can look at the tensions and say these are really helpful, these are another form of checks and balances about how we move towards getting a coherent and cohesive structure that promotes improvement for children and families. (Trustee-MAT 7).

All but 3 Trustees viewed strategizing as a challenging task which would require them to draw on previous experiences, both within and outside of education. Their narratives were infused with anecdotes of strategic thinking in other environments, such as ‘I know the basics from my previous role, I just adapt them to this setting.’ (Trustee-MAT 6). Some Trustees that spoke of STA in this way, also indicated that they felt they should be experts in this field. This is concerning given contradictory comments that indicated it to be a learning experience and appeared to convey their reticence to betray any lack of confidence in this area. This is an interesting area for future research, in terms of whether this superficial confidence marks them apart from other Trustees as ‘experts’ in STA, and if so what is the impact on the board?

Some Trustees talked about mistakes (largely of other MATs) in terms of learning events for them and their boards, as this trustee describes:

So hence the three years of watching other people do it quite quickly, learning from what they felt mistakes that may have happened or experiences and then did our homework, (Trustee- MAT 2). Several Trustees described the emotion involved in strategic thinking, particularly in relation to the MAT’s values, some in almost quixotic visionary terms, in which their MAT would restore order to what they perceived to be a ‘chaotic system’, a ‘jungle’ with ‘predatory’ organizations ‘hoovering up weaker schools’. This reinforces the notion of education as a marketplace in the minds of Trustees, and the competitive nature of STA within it. Others described their strategic thinking as ‘radical’, in terms of its innovation, and ‘entrepreneurial’.

A summary of the five areas is located in figures 5 and 6 which illustrate how the analytical framework was used to examine the differing schemas used by participants to frame their STA. The table also includes the metacognitive elements of STA, and the extent to which
participants viewed were adapting and managing their thinking in relation to their metacognitive knowledge. The concluding section of the paper examines the findings in relation to the two final research questions.

Schemas and their manifestations.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person Schemas</th>
<th>Organization Schemas</th>
<th>Object concept schemas</th>
<th>Event Schemas</th>
<th>Metacognitive aspects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CEOs are other CEOs as competitors in a market-driven environment. Strategic learning is limited by lack of sharing.</td>
<td>Organization seen as hierarchical, strategic also hierarchical. Local school board members defer to trustees via boards of governors. CEOs run themselves as more able to do this work than local boards. Several trustees imagine that local boards have less knowledge of the organization as a whole.</td>
<td>Strategic plans used as communication documents between trustees and school boards.</td>
<td>Used to send organizational values and positions in relation to other MATS.</td>
<td>Treats leadership (as leader) more comfortable with monitoring 'the plan' rather than innovating. (Task variable)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEOs believe that board members within the MAT are there to approve strategy in all but one case, in which individual schools give power to drive their own strategy and incorporate this into strategic plans.</td>
<td>CEOs run organization as a whole, regardless of whether it has a standing organizational identity.</td>
<td>Strategic plans used as learning documents to instill new schools into MAT values and goals.</td>
<td>CEOs far readers to talk about strategy as a learning activity and to acknowledge the emergent learning process elements of strategic; tends to favor other explanations for why they work on strategy (e.g., other paid work environments or boards). (Strategy variable)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trustees and CEOs vulnerable to influence of consultants and ad hoc (external) to co-create vision of the organization.</td>
<td>CEOs aware of stakeholders but tend to prioritize stakeholders who influence market share i.e. Dept for Education &amp; ROIs.</td>
<td>Schema of delegation is used ordering documents to allocate institutional wide responsibilities. Used as instruction documents for trustees to indicate culture of the MAT.</td>
<td>(Person variable)</td>
<td>STA seen as learning but only in relation to the new context, i.e. education. Some reference to the notion of 'best' in this area. From trustees with previously high positions in organizations outside of trust.</td>
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### Conclusions
The final section of this paper examines what the implications are for MATs, Trustees and CEOs, particularly from a perspective of CEO and trustee development in STA and concludes with a summary of the theoretical contribution this study makes to what is known about strategy as learning in multi-level organisations.

**Implications for Trustee and CEO development**

This study illustrates that although strategy is a learning activity, there are blocks in terms of the four schema, and limits to the metacognitive abilities of respondents in thinking about strategic thinking in action. In terms of CEO strategizing, it is clear that these individuals have in all cases, fairly extensive networks to call upon in terms of strategic insights. These networks can be helpful at times, but learning is inhibited by the marketized environment in which MATs are placed: this makes information sharing far more limited than it could be.

Trustees do not appear to have such well-formed support systems in relation to strategy, and learning for them is predicated on insights relating to prior or current paid job roles. This can be empowering provided that they are able to adapt their schema in order to encompass the very different arena of MAT strategy. In some cases this appeared to be difficult with chairs and Trustees, on one hand, manifesting high levels of cognitive dissonance, on the other, defensive overconfidence.

In the case of the former, the combination of a somewhat tentative approach along with insight and awareness of their developing knowledge in this area, is a positive combination, if combined with a willingness to seek out new ways of strategic thinking in action, will result in the development of their identities and sense of agency in this area (Johnson, 2008). There is also a danger that too great a reliance on experience of strategizing in a business environment, particularly a commercial one where profit is the driving force, that Trustees will be too rigid in their approach, drawing on scenarios that are not appropriate for an educational environment.

This is particularly concerning, as so many Chairs of Trustees are drawn from the business sector. In order to counter this may require a new approach to learning and development for Trustees. As external formal development events may be rejected by those who feel that their professional experience puts them above such engagement (see Baxter, 2016), there may be a case for very specific MAT focused events during which they engage with other MAT chairs/Trustees; events that focus on deliberately harvesting experiences from other sectors and which focus on adapting these to the complex world of MATs. This would add value to the available expertise on leading MATs, whilst also allowing for new information to come to light. External mentoring is available for Chairs of Trustees and their boards, the National Leader of Governance Scheme began in National Leaders of Governance (NLG) are experienced individuals who offer their knowledge and skills to support schools (NCL, 2013).

However, it was not clear from this research how much help these individuals were able to offer. There was a very basic evaluation of the scheme in 2014, but this did not apply to help on strategic thinking in action, nor did it focus on MATs (Matthias, 2014).

CEOs are clearly bearing the brunt of STA, carrying out far more work on horizon scanning and linking with official bodies such as Regional School Commissioners and the DFE. This
places them more powerfully in terms of the whole system, but equally, creates a pressure to craft strategy in such a way as to suit the agendas of these bodies. In terms of CEO learning, a key area for this appears to be in devising ways in which STA can engage with all stakeholders within the organization and outside of it. CEOs were reasonably candid in relation to their struggles in relation to this aspect, yet it was not clear in all cases how much real importance they placed upon it. In this respect, the study supports concerns that MPs have on how well these large organisations are really serving communities (HMSO, 2017). In terms of development, the study tends to suggest that at the moment CEOs are carrying out STA in an environment which is infused with differing agendas and that negotiating a pathway through is not only very demanding, task wise, but equally from an organizational cultural perspective: Individual schools and local boards (and to a certain extent, Trustees), have built strong object concept schemas based on their particular needs and those of their communities: consultation with them on strategy appears to be very limited and there is a marked tendency in all but one trust, to adopt a hierarchical imposed strategy throughout the MAT. This, as research in the field of interorganizational collaboration has shown, in terms of future development, will be limiting, as individual organizations within the group become more distant from the parent organization and may resort to forms of resistance discourse which create alternative realities for these organizations (Putnam et al., 2005), reinforcing individual identities whilst negating a homogenous identity for the organization as a whole. It is important therefore, that MAT CEOs are mentored from outside of their organization, if this is not already happening (as was the case in a couple of the organizations under scrutiny. Internal mentoring was occurring in some organizations in terms of metacognitive elements of STA, CEOs do in all but one case, recognise the challenges that lie ahead, and do, bar one respondent, understand STA as a learning activity. Their narratives were peppered with references to their last post, and in all but 2 cases this was as Head of a single school. These references indicate a strong tendency to draw on past schemas set in single school settings, in order to make sense of the multi-level arrangement in which they now find themselves. This appeared to support their confidence and self-efficacy beliefs in their STA ability, but also illustrated that in some cases they lack insight into the extent to which these ways of thinking may constrain them in their new environment. In several cases they appeared vulnerable to advice from external consultants or pressure from other bodies- such as the DfE. This is slightly concerning given the lack of detailed organizational knowledge that these individuals/bodies possess. In the case of DfE interference, this may well also act in undermining the professional agency of CEOs, with respect to their ownership of strategic planning, whilst placing undue pressures upon them, both financial and capacity wise, to align with their agenda.

Both Trustees and CEOs adopted a combative narrative seeing themselves to be striving in a hostile environment. This was particularly evident in trustee narratives, which relied heavily on stated values when describing their STA.

In relation to event schemas, meetings were powerful in terms of establishing organizational norms on strategic thinking. They reinforced the hierarchy within the
organization and appeared confirmatory in establishing group trustee identity as an in group whilst establishing local boards as outgroups, with far fewer responsibilities than Trustees. Away days or strategic days appeared to be restricted in terms of provoking STA, for trustee delegates. They often tended to revolve around critique of a strategic plan rather than STA, although it could be argued, that this form of engagement did, to a certain extent, encourage a form of strategic thinking in action that may not have occurred at other times during the academic year. The extent to which all delegates were able to engage with activities during the course of these events, is not clear, nor is the link between these events and the strategic direction of the institution, as a result of them. But this is not unusual as Johnson (2008) points out, the ritual itself can be a valuable source of learning, even if the strategy is not translated into action outside of the day itself.

The research also highlighted the need to establish the culture of strategic thinking in action, throughout the organization: This would avoid it being seen to be the province of the Trustees and CEO only, and may invite more creativity into the process, as well as a healthy awareness that information from individual school communities can enrich the process and increase its legitimacy in the eyes of individual schools within the MAT: this, as the literature suggests, is strongly linked to organizational trust (Neilsen and Rao, 1987) and accountability.

Theoretical Contribution
This research has added to the theory on strategy as learning in further developing Casey and Goldman’s idea of strategic thinking in action. In drawing on this particular case of strategy as learning in a complex environment, the paper employed schema theory to examine strategy as a learning activity and one in which metacognitive ability was highlighted as important to the adaptation of existing schemas. In combining this with a socio-cognitive, constructivist view of learning, we were also able to examine the different communities of practice and socio material influences upon strategic thinking in action. In so doing we also identify the need for future research to adopt a critical identity perspective (Black et al., 2017), in order to examine how the development of capabilities relating to strategic thinking in action affect both individual feelings of capacity and agency, and how this in turn affects the organizational identity as a whole (rather than the sense of fragmentation that appears in other papers within this series, see Baxter and Floyd, 2019, Baxter and Cornforth, 2018). By adopting an adapted version of Casey and Goldman’s strategic thinking in action, we were also able to view all strategy making activities as one. This is helpful in an arena which in our view, creates artificial dichotomies between different strategizing activities. The paper also pointed out the need to study strategy making in relation to trust building within multi-level, multi-sight organizations: a key element in the development of organizational cultures and identity in successful mergers and collaborations (Zaheer et al., 2003)

References


NGA. (2019) Moving MATs forward: the power of governance Birmingham National Governance Association


Appendix 01

Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAT</th>
<th>Number of schools</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Area spread</th>
<th>Profile</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01 SOUTH</td>
<td>4 CEO, chair trustees, 1 trustee</td>
<td>1 town</td>
<td>Urban Deprived</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02 SOUTH</td>
<td>5 Chair + 4 trustees</td>
<td>1 town</td>
<td>Urban Deprived</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02 NORTH</td>
<td>7 Chair + 4 trustees</td>
<td>1 town + 2 rural schools</td>
<td>Mixed socio economic 3 in SED areas 4 not</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04 NORTH</td>
<td>6 CEO, Chair + 6 trustees</td>
<td>3 towns one county</td>
<td>Special schools (special ed needs)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>05 NORTH</td>
<td>5 Chair + 2 trustees</td>
<td>1 town</td>
<td>All primary, high SED</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06 NORTH</td>
<td>8 Chair, CEO + 2 trustees</td>
<td>1 town + outlying rural area</td>
<td>Mixed SED, all through</td>
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<tr>
<td>07 NORTH</td>
<td>8 Chair, CEO + 4 trustees</td>
<td>1 town and outlying rural area</td>
<td>Mixed SED, all through</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08 SOUTH</td>
<td>2 Chair + 7 trustees</td>
<td>1 town</td>
<td>Mixed SED predominantly primary</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

*Socio economic deprivation levels based on Free school meals indicator (SED)*

Size of Multi Academy Trusts and their categorization (NGA, 2019)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Size of MAT</th>
<th>Number of students approx</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>6-15</td>
<td>5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>16-30</td>
<td>12000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very large</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>12000+</td>
</tr>
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</table>


