Governing Collaborations: How Boards engage with their communities in multi- academy trusts in England

Decentralization policy in English education since 2010 has resulted in the creation of large groupings of schools as Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), governed and led by central leadership teams and trustees. However, research illustrates that many of these organisations are failing to connect with school communities and as a result are growing too distant from those they purport to serve. This paper uses documentary analysis and interviews with 30 MAT Board Members to examine this key area. The paper reveals that although there are some strategies in place to overcome this issue, that failure to implement fundamental processes such as communication strategies are leading to fragmentation and feelings of disconnect, particularly amongst trustees, and this raises questions as to the extent to which MATs are in touch with and serving their school communities.

Keywords: public management, governance, education, schools, democratic governance, England

1 Introduction and background.

Over the last three decades, new patterns of interaction between government and society can be observed across the public sector, in an attempt to solve seemingly intractable problems and creating new possibilities for governing. Kooiman argues that these take place on two conceptual levels: the first at the 'concrete governing level wherein collaborative efforts to govern manifest in myriad ways, as co-regulation, co-steering, co-production, cooperative management and public –private partnerships on national, regional and local levels' (Kooiman, 1993, p.1). This study concerns the second level -meta-governance - in which attempts are made to get to grips with fundamental developments and structural characteristics of the societies in which we live.

Education is an area in which, over the last 3 decades, many governments around the globe have progressively decentralised. While primarily aimed at improving the quality of education, decentralisation has also been perceived as a way to increase efficiency, encourage innovation, and combat social inequality and segregation in education (Waslander, 2010). Internationally, bureaucratic forms of governing have shifted to forms of networked governance in which public services are governed 'at arm's length' by a complex amalgam of targets, high stakes inspection and forms of management derived from the new public management techniques of the mid 1980s (Clarke & Newman, 1997). There has also been considerable emphasis on collaboration in the public sector with public services provided by a mixture of 3rd sector organizations, private companies and state subsidised contractors.

Academy schools, introduced by the Labour Government under Prime Minister Tony Blair , were set up to improve the standards in poor performing inner London schools (Woods & Brighouse, 2014). In a similar mode to American Charter Schools (Ford & Ihrke, 2016), the academies project is premised on the belief that these schools, can provide a better education than traditional schools that are supported by increasingly 'inept' Local Education Authorities (LEAs), whist increasing parental choice, making taxpayer savings and reducing the size of the public sector. Academies have autonomy in terms of: curriculum, freedom from LA control; they do not need to abide by the teachers' pay scale, or indeed employ qualified teachers (QTS). Because many academies have converted from maintained status-supported by the Local Education Authority-their boards, retained from their former status, are a mix of skill based and stakeholder models: The first , a model based on the field of third sector and corporate governance, in which trustees are recruited for particular skills sets: human resources or finance, for example. The second, in which trustees are chosen to represent stakeholders, for example, parents or community leaders. Once academies join a MAT their governance structures become multi-level with a board of trustees at the apex of the organisation, and individual governing boards at academy level. The powers delegated to academy level, vary greatly

between MATs (see Authors, 2019). This decentralisation has, in effect, meant more control of education by local non-governmental actors (Hooge, 1998; Lauglo, 1995).

Whilst these changes are confined to the English system only, (education is a devolved service in the UK), the policy has manifested in rapid and, many argue, unsustainable changes to the system, (see for example: Editorial, 2016) leading it to be anecdotally nicknamed 'the educational lab of Europe'. The reforms, publicly premised on the idea of increasing public value in education, have consisted of the removal of power from many Local Authorities (LAs), (Authors , 2016) and increasing school freedoms in the shape of free schools and academies (Higham and Hopkins 2007), whilst also raising the bar in the high stakes inspection and regulation of schools (Authors et al 2015).

This study examines the role of MATS or Multi -Academy trusts: The British Government's response to solving entrenched problems in English education by a decentralization and deconcentration policy. Deconcentration assumes that officials, governors, managers and professionals who are closest to schools, are best positioned to make decisions and, 'should be given incentives to take initiatives and control and to exercise discretionary power' (OECD, 2010, p.10). MATs are groups or federations of academy schools that have grouped together and are governed by an overarching board of trustees. Similar structures and forms of school groupings can be found in the United States as Charter Management organizations (Wohlstetter et al,1995) . In November 2018 there were over 20,100 state-funded schools in England. Of these 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).

The development of Multi-Academy Trusts has been driven by the need to provide a more joined up approach between phases of schooling (Chapman & Muijs, 2013), along with a wider impetus across the public sector, to enhance the 'development and implementation of new ideas that disrupt the common wisdom, and habitual practices that hitherto dominated the solution context.'(Torfing, 2019, p. 15). The most trenchant problems in English education, are, the achievement gap between the economically advantaged and disadvantaged (Francis, 2011), and the failure of many poorly performing schools to be able to improve. Such schools are often (but not exclusively) situated in areas of high deprivation and the governance where the leadership and staffing of such schools, reflects a failure to attract quality applicants (Gorard, Taylor, & Fitz, 2001). This often contributes to a downward spiral in terms of pupil achievement (Reardon, 2011). School budgets have also suffered substantial cuts under Conservative policy of austerity (Blyth, 2013) and the sharing of back office services has become increasingly attractive as LAs can no longer support schools with the same level of services as they once enjoyed. Paletta, identifies two main drivers for interschool collaboration: The first, to maximise resources, the second to encourage local development (Paletta, 2012, p.1133). But, as much literature on collaborations reports, 'networks often find reasonable solution approaches, but then run into operational, performance or legal barriers that prevent the next action step' (McGuire & Agranoff, 2011, p:265).

This study addresses recent research into reasons for MAT failure, in so doing it draws on research on collaborations across the public sector and the reasons for their failure. Research into MATs illustrates that they fail due to: a) financial ineptitude (HMSO, 2017), b) too rapid expansion and failure to improve schools within the organization (Chapman et al, 2013) and c) failure to connect with school communities and their needs (Parliament 2017; HCEC, 2014-15). One of the key challenges for these large and complex organizations lies in their hierarchical multi-level governance structures (Authors and Floyd,2019). The government select committee report into MATs (HMSO, 2017) emphasises the need for both upward accountability and local engagement (p, 9) and comments that, 'It is unclear how local communities can get voice in a MAT.' (p16). and furthermore, ' MATS should demonstrate a sincere commitment to outreach and engagement with the local community.' (p16).

As Mandell and Keast report (2007) the ways in which collaborations work around collaborative obstacles is key to the success of the collaboration (Mandell & Keast, 2007), but, as Agranoff argues 'collaborative decisions or agreements are the products of a particular type of mutual learning and adjustment', (Agranoff, 2006, p:59). This paper investigates a key challenge in hierarchical governing structures: The extent to which MATs remain in touch with the needs of local school communities which they serve and the ways in which they are adapting to do this. This challenge is not unique to education but is reflected across the public and third sectors (Bradshaw and Toubiana, 2013). In so doing the study responds to a key issue in current education policy in examining how deconcentration policies in education have impacted the extent to which schools look to and are able to serve local community needs. The research questions are (a) To what extent are boards in multi-academy trusts aware of the need to include information on school communities in their decision-making processes, and if so (b) How they are attempting to do this and (c) What are the implications for how multi-level governance structures ensure they serve local needs. The paper begins with a discussion of governance in schools and the context in which this research is set. It then moves on to describing the research methods and sample. Section 4 details the findings of the study before moving onto the conclusions and implications for theory and practice.

A note on terminology

This area of research is very new and the language and the terminology, constantly evolving. For this paper we use the following terms to refer to different types of 'board' member at different levels within a MAT: Trustee sBoard Members (TBM) at the apex of the organisation with overall responsibility for the governance of the MAT; Academy Board Members (ABM) these members of local academy boards with delegated powers from the Trustee Board which can vary in scope and range according to the MAT's scheme of delegation. Some MATs also establish Cluster Committees which have certain delegated powers for a group of schools in the MAT

1.1   Catchment area knowledge and Decision-making processes

A public and equable system of schooling is one of the cornerstones of a healthy democracy (Freire, 1996). As variations in socio-economic status of individuals in school catchment areas varies greatly, it is vital that the needs of communities are factored into school decision making processes(Barnes et al., 2006). The necessity of this is highlighted by Campbell's (2005, 2006) research into the key role of schools in establishing civic norms and linking to future social capital in communities (Campbell, 2005, 2006). In his view schools are, 'constitutive of and constituted by the value systems that emerge from the communities in which they are situated (Campbell, 2005, p:10), and key to the development of civil society. Communities are key stakeholders in the education process and information about their character, climate and particular needs should form an important part of decision-making processes in schools (OECD, 2006). However, as the OECD report into parent and community voice in schools revealed, although, 'Decentralisation is the natural context for the discussion of enhancing parental and community voice in school decision-making… it is far from synonymous with it. (OECD, p:86).' The report also revealed that 'some countries were making a considerable effort to engage community residents and parents in the life of their schools' (OECD, p,87). Yet the picture as painted across all OECD countries was mixed with evidence that overall community and parent participation in school boards is in decline. Research carried out by Gunnarsson et al (2009) to investigate the relationship between school autonomy and parental participation concluded that, 'policies should grant autonomy in circumstances where the local community would willingly exercise local control. In the case of some rural communities and those in areas of high socio economic deprivation, this was not the case (Gunnarsson, et al, 2009, p:48)

In 2009 Hargreaves et al carried out extensive research into the role of schools in their communities, focusing on schools in predominantly rural areas on British and Nordic countries using Habermas's

(Habermas, 1968) dual concepts of system-world and life -world perspectives - see figure 1. (Hargreaves et al 2009). Their analysis indicated that the system world of schools, in which results, targets and standardized curriculum formed the basis of pupil and school success or failure, was a narrow way to judge schools and pupils, and yet, many schools are driven by this system-view, not least since the advent of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and other international comparators. Hargreaves work on the life world perspective is strongly aligned with Campbell's work on schools as central to the creation of civic norms (Hargreaves, 2005), future intention to politically engage and participate in civic society, particularly through volunteering (Rochester et al, 2012).
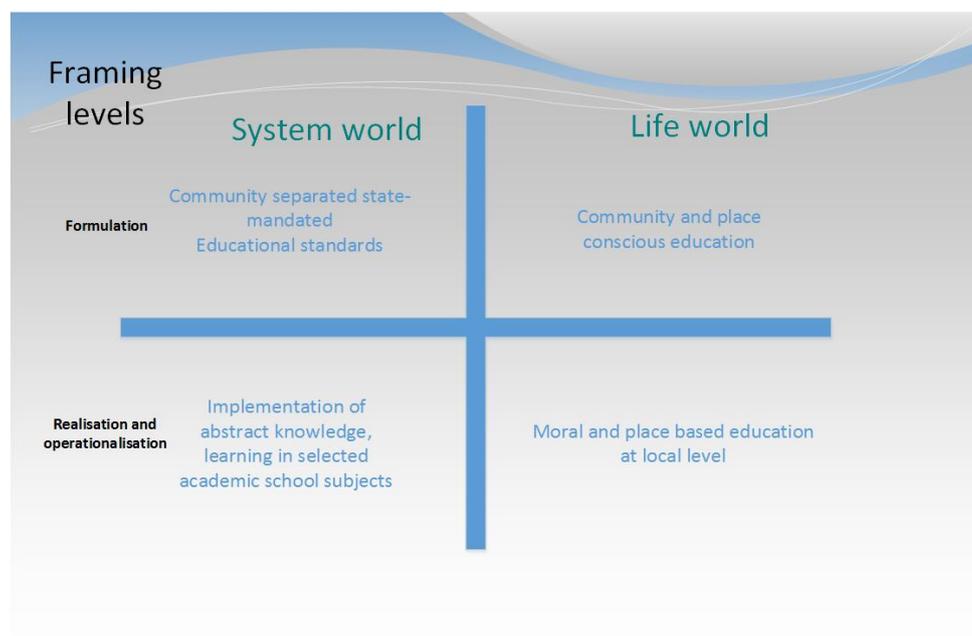

Figure 1 Typology of system and life world perspectives adapted from Kvalsund et al 2009

The life-world perspective, illustrated in figure 1, outlines the potential to offer community and place conscious education. But to offer this type of education, schools must have the mechanisms to gain knowledge about the communities they serve to inform key decisions. There is a great deal of education research in relation to the system world, and very little in terms of the life world perspective (Abbott et al., 1999). This negation of place-based aspects has infused the public sector since the growth of New Public Management and its focus on 'efficiencies' and standardization in public service delivery (Hambleton & Howard, 2013). However, alongside this there has been a concomitant growth in the idea of co-production in governance (Ostrom, 1996, Hartley et al , 2019), based on the idea that, 'citizens have individual and important skills that have to be included in the work of public agencies in order to increase the quality and effectiveness of public services.' (Cinquini et al., 2017, p.2). Those in favour of co-production argue it has an important function to fulfil in terms of organizational decision making and the ability to challenge institutional isomorphism: combatting the tendency of institutions to reinforce or reproduce social norms. They also argue for its potential to prevent the distortions created by the business orientation of New Public Management (ibid, p.2). This, in the case of Multi Academy Trusts, set up in a quasi-marketplace, is an important function, given the substantial amount of evidence that lack of consideration of local character and culture of schools, is detrimental to pupil attainment (Perry & Francis, 2010).

The ways in which communities may participate in the life and decision making of complex organisations such as MATs may take a number of forms, Hirchman defines these as: Voice, choice

contribution and control (Hirschman, 1978). In common with other public services, the UK Government has placed a great deal of emphasis on parental choice in education, although whether parents do in fact have greater choice over schools is very doubtful, as we argue elsewhere (Authors & Clarke, 2013). The extent to which parents contribute to the life of the school is also questionable, (Izzo et al., 1999), as parents are increasingly time poor, (Farrell & Jones, 2000),

Although community input into decision making via the school governance has been in place since 1977 when The Taylor Act opened up governance to a much wider range of community stakeholders, including parents, local politicians, students and representatives from the wider community (Authors, 2016), the structures of MATs has created new challenges. As Widmer and Houchin (1999, p.29) point out, federal organisations 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 on MAT boards has recently been undermined by government in their drive to recruit board members on a skills basis; eroding the democratic representative role of MAT boards. This can lead to an erosion of local accountability, and a failure to cater for the needs of local parents and children (Wilkins, 2009, 2014). This is reflected in a recent government report into MATs which reported that:

> MATs are not sufficiently accountable to their local community and they feel disconnected from decision making at trustee board level. There is too much emphasis on 'upward accountability' and not enough on local engagement (paragraph, 46) (Parliament, 2017).

The current model of school governance is presently premised on a mix of control of (agency theory) and collaboration with leadership (stewardship theory) , and reflects the model adopted by the public sector more widely (Van Puyvelde et al., 2016). The model of multi-level or nested governance structures that have developed within MATs (see section 2), means that trustee boards, at the apex of the organization, are now more removed from their school communities (the catchment area in which schools are placed), (see figure 2). This, according to previous research (Authors, 2016, Authors and Floyd, 2019) has proved to be difficult in terms of creating a strategy that not only benefits the whole organization or MAT but is also the communities in which schools are located.

2   Background and governance of MATs

Models of governance in English schools have changed over the last 30 years, since the Education Reform Act of 1988 offered schools the opportunity to manage their own budgets. The Act also opened up a more marketized approach to schools and began what was to be a gradual erosion of Local Authority Control (Lawton, 1994). This undermining of LAs was prompted by a damning critique by the Audit Commission (1988) entitled 'Surplus capacity in secondary schools', which criticised the support given to schools and the lack of planning for places. In terms of school governance, the model, which until then had been one of stakeholder governance with school governing bodies comprised of representatives from the community, local government, teachers, students and elected parents, began to change to a skills-based model premised on the idea that trustees with particular skills to offer are more effective than those chosen for their democratic, representative value; although of course, in reality they can be a combination of the two (see Authors, 2016).

Models of governance in MATS are set up according to schemes of delegation: The Board of Trustees is accountable in law for decisions relating to the academies within the group. The National Governance Association outlines three core model schemes of delegation that it recommends schools adopt. Which one they adopt depends largely on the size of the grouping and its composition (Allcroft 2016a). The Education Funding Agency- the agency responsible for academy financial regulation stipulates the mandatory inclusion of a number of committees for academies, these include: Audit; children; families and community; finance and general purposes; resources and standards and achievement committees (NASBM 2017).

Articles of association outline the governance structure and how the trust will operate, how Members are recruited and replaced, and how many Trustees the Members can appoint to the trust Board. Trustees are accountable to Members for the performance of the trust. MATs are charitable companies therefore Trustees are charity Trustees (under section 177 (1) of the charities act 2011 and company directors. The Trustees are responsible for the general control and management of the administration of the trust, and legally responsible and accountable for all statutory functions; for the performance of all schools within the trust, and the approval of a written scheme of delegation of financial powers. In addition, Trustees must: Ensure clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction; hold the executive to account for the educational performance of the trust's schools and their pupils, and the performance management of staff and oversee the financial performance of the trust and make sure its money is well spent.

In terms of further delegation of governance as figure 2 illustrates, MATs may decide to have any one of a number of structures, in which they may delegate any number of governance powers depending on the nature of the schools (high performing, poor performing etc.). Many MATs choose to have Academy Boards which are established by Trustees to carry out school level governance functions: As a committee of the Board delegation can be removed at any time. These Academy Boards can perform much of the school level governance if the Trustees require it. Larger MATs may also have Cluster Committees. These committees have delegated governance powers, just as in the case of Academy Boards, but act on behalf of a number of schools which may be grouped into geographical clusters. Schemes of delegation and differences between them are explored in another paper based on this funded project (Authors, 2020).
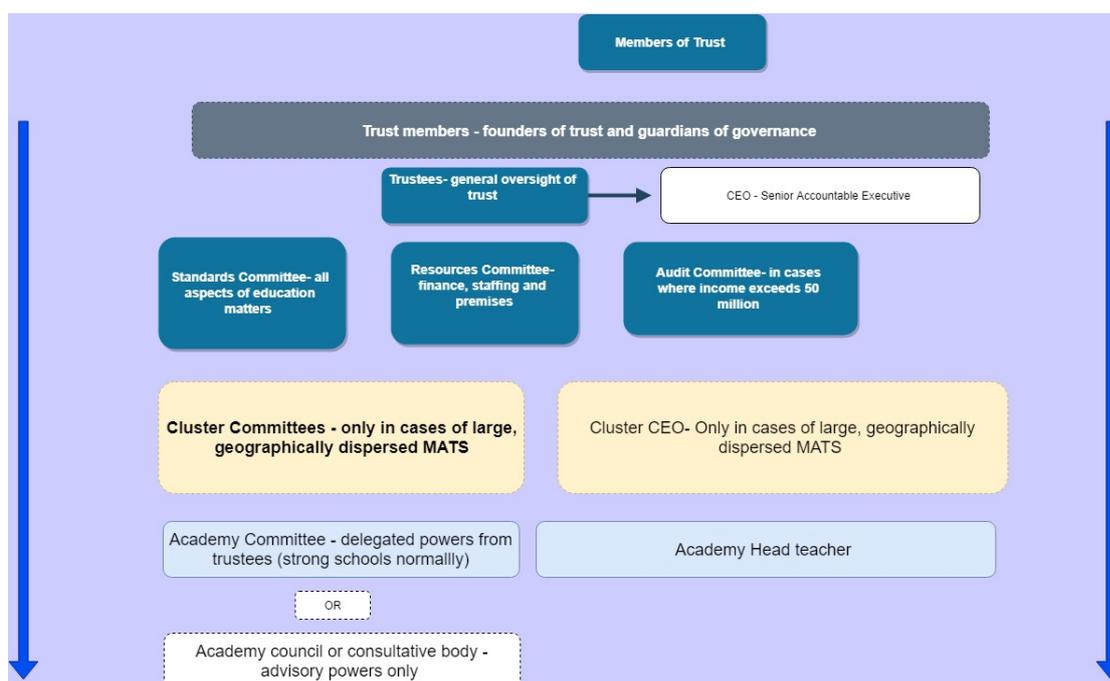

Figure 2 Possible Schemes of Delegation adapted from Authors and Floyd, 2019.

2.1 Context

There is not a great deal of research on the governance of collaborations in England, primarily because they are a relatively new phenomenon. But there is extensive research that examines them from a US perspective in relation to non-profit charter schools. This research focuses on whether they improve pupil performance (Wohlstetter et al , 2003) , parental involvement (Smith et al, 2011) the effectiveness of their governance ,and the perceptions of the public (Ford & Ihrke, 2016);the extent to which parents are satisfied with school provision (Wohlstetter et al, 2008). However, the limited

amount of research that exists in the not-for-profit sector, indicates the considerable levels of complexity and challenge involved in operationalising these structures (Rees et al, 2012).

Nested governance arrangements are hierarchical and, 'tension-filled and oscillating, or in need of balancing and crafting as opposed to managing.' (Bradshaw.P. and Toubiana 2014, p.232). Cornforth's review of non-profit governance research, published in 2012 revealed a distinct lack of research into multi-level governance structures, although they are found, 'among many non-profits that operate at both national and local levels.' (Cornforth 2012, p.1117). Widmer and Houchin (1999, p.29) argue that these governance arrangements often experience a tension between 'the need for greater efficiency and centralization and the need for 'representation' of local interests.' Whilst Ostrower and Stone (2010) highlight the need to examine the ways in which culture and context affect multi-level governance structures, pointing out that not for profits in the same way as multi-academy trusts, may contain organizations that are widely geographically dispersed. This effectively means that policies must take account of school cultures and contexts. The challenge for Boards at the apex of the organisation for understanding the needs of often diverse and dispersed school communities, and considering them in decision making processes, is not insubstantial. There are also considerable issues around power within nested governance arrangements, as Mayo and Taylor (2001) point out, the locus of power with in such organizations, is continually shifting.

Managing the tension between the local and the central interest is a key area of concern for nested governance structures and the most recent research into governing collaborations in schools indicates that this tension is present – particularly in structures that are geographically dispersed (Authors ,2019). It is also clear that in some cases there are tensions between schools (their Heads and local Academy Boards) and the central Board of Trustees. In addition, a recent paper written as part of this study concluded that the powers awarded to Academy Level Boards were often limited (see Authors, 2020 forthcoming).

3   Method and Sample

Collecting data from MATs is challenging, due to the pressure placed upon their MATs that are struggling are reluctant to permit access to researchers, who need permission from gatekeepers (normally chair of the trust or CEO) to take part. As this study aimed to take a broad overview of the extent to which MAT Boards look to incorporate information on local communities in their decision-making processes, this study does not differentiate responses according to geographical location or size of MAT. Interviews were drawn from an opportunity sample of 6 MATS which were selected using existing contacts (figure 3). Data was gathered from 30 one hour semi-structured qualitative interviews with Board Members over the period 2017-18. Participants included a) TrusteeBoard Members (TBM) at the apex of the organisation with overall responsibility for the governance of the MAT), and Academy Board Members (ABM) -located in individual schools and who possess delegated powers from the Trustee Board which vary in scope and range according to the MAT's scheme of delegation. Participants were self-selecting and invited to participate via CEO or Chair of Trustees. This evidence is combined with documentary analysis of formal reports, school websites and documentation from governor support organisations. The sample includes interviews drawn from 4 trusts in the North of England and 2 in the South. Schools included within the sample are listed in Appendix 1. Six out of the seven MATs covered primary, middle and secondary phases of education and one MAT was solely focused on primary provision. Information on coding methods can be found in section 4.

The interviewees were self-selecting, and this accounts for the diversity in terms of the number of respondents at each MAT. Interviewees were recruited via governor support agencies, school support organisations and executive Head teachers. The interviews followed a semi-structured qualitative

approach and were analysed using Nvivo software to draw out the key themes emerging from the data. The questions can be found in Appendix 01. These were then examined in greater detail and in relation to the challenges which emerged.

Interviews (MATS)	Websites	Printed data analysis	Other	Area spread	Number of schools	Maturity
MAT 01-**South** Interview with: -Chair of Trustees (1) -TBM (1)	Website analysis	Scheme of delegation Strategic plan	Mission statement	Confined to one town.	4	2015
MAT 02-**South** Interview with: -Chair of Trustees (1) -TBM (3) -parent (1) (ABM)	Website analysis	Scheme of delegation Strategic plan	Mission statement	Confined to one town	5	2012
MAT 03-**North** Interview with: --Chair of TB (1) () -TBM (2) -ABM (2).	Website analysis	Scheme of delegation Strategic plan	Mission statement	Confined to one town with 2 schools in rural areas.	7	2010
MAT 04-**North** Interview with: -Trust Director (TBM) - ABM (2) -TBM (2) -Parent (ABM) (2)	Website analysis	Scheme of delegation Strategic plan	Mission statement	Spread over three towns.	6	2013
MAT 05 **North** Interview with: Chair TBM (1)	Website analysis	Scheme of delegation Strategic plan	Mission statement	Confined to one town.	5	2015
MAT 06 **North** Interview with: Chair of TB -TBM(6) -TBM and Board chair (ABM) (1) -TBM Parent (2) -ABM (3).	Website analysis	Scheme of delegation Strategic plan	Mission Statement	Spread over one town and outlying rural areas.	8	2015

Figure 3 Sample

Data analysis considered key themes emerging from both documentary analysis and interview data. It has proved useful in drawing together 'the apparently independent and disconnected elements of existence into related parts of a whole' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p:36). The accounts were analysed for references to governing processes in relation to how they were being adapted in order to engage with local school communities. Following this, the authors compiled a table which illustrates the different mechanisms that Boards used to collect and use information about communities within their governing structures, this is set out in figures 5 and 6. This permitted the researchers to build up a picture of the challenges inherent within the subject under scrutiny, whilst also revealing the ways in which Boards are attempting to meet them. Preliminary results were tabulated in terms of the following categories: *mechanisms* used, and whether they were *internally* focused (within the organization) or *externally* focused activities; *opportunities* arising through the multi-level governance structure; and *challenges* arising in terms of each information gaining opportunity. These were then broken down into further categories. The broad categories used to group data were structures and practices as these categories have proven useful in other studies looking to uncover emergences in board practices (Stone, Crosby, and Bryson 2013). We also added people to the *practices* category, as practices are carried out by particular individuals with particular roles and linking these two categories was, we felt, important in terms of power. We added the category 'detractors' to help identify barriers that hindered the collection and use of information from local school communities. Figure 4 illustrates the elements of people and practices and structures, that emerged from the data. The detractors are illustrated in figure 7, which shows what happens at

structural level and how it impacts on people and practices. Elements under the heading 'detractors' were analysed for their impact on structures and processes and are described in section 4.2 .
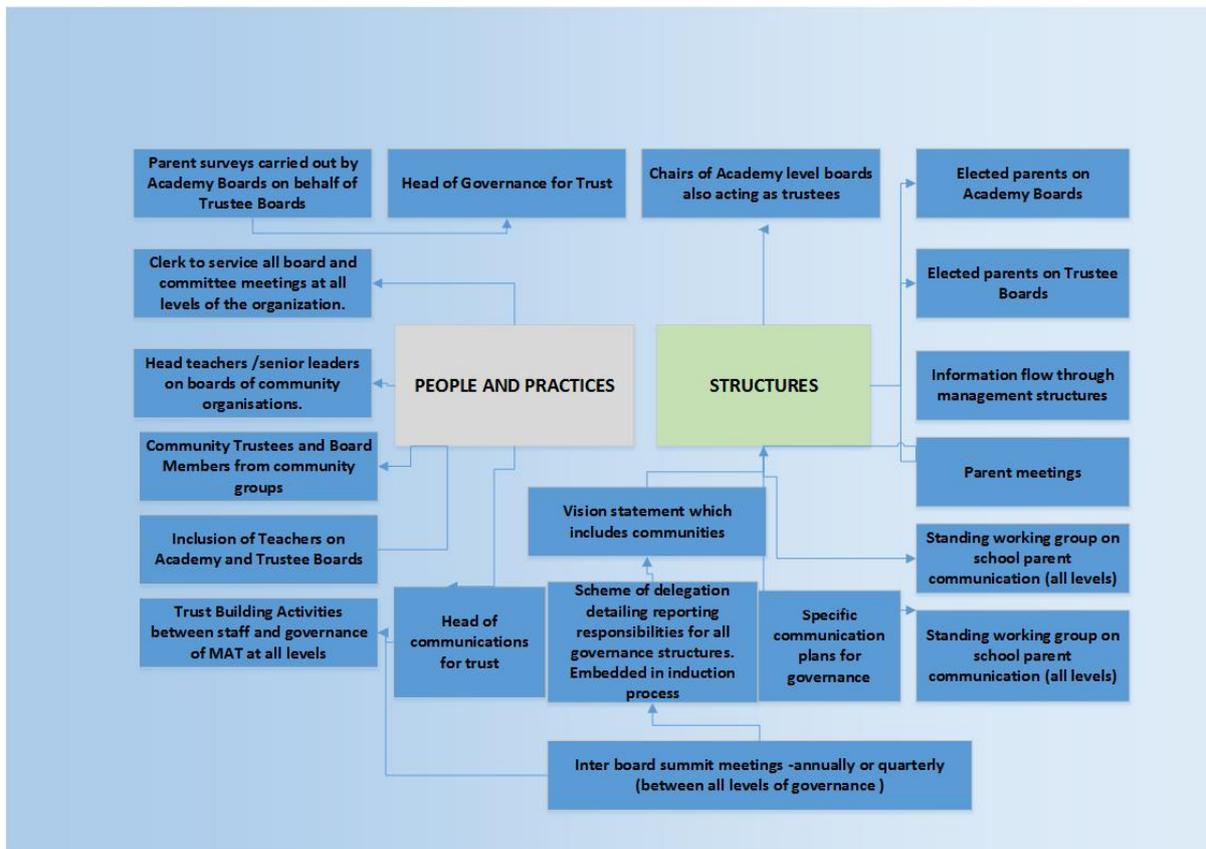

Figure 4 People , Practices and Structures.

The data was collated into a table which includes areas in which schools were looking to join up communication between layers of governance and communities. (see figures 5 and 6). Figure 5 illustrates the mechanisms being employed to facilitate cross organization communication and the , the opportunities afforded by it. Figure 6 illustrates those same mechanisms but focuses in contrast, on the challenges of each. Data was also coded via two broad themes of, *structure,* and *people,* and *practices*; this was helpful in revealing the ways that each were contributing to MAT engagement with school communities.

4   Findings

The findings section of this paper begins with responses to research questions:

To what extent are boards in multi-academy trusts aware of the need to include information on school communities in their decision-making processes, and if so (b) How they are attempting to do this. As the third research question: (c) What are the implications for how multi-level governance structures ensure they serve local needs, pertains to the future of MATs , this is included in section 5 , the discussion section.

4.1   People and Practices and Structures

In order to explore research questions a) and b) this section begins by illustrating the mechanisms being employed by trustees and local boards in order to facilitate communication between MAT levels. Figure 5 illustrates the opportunities arising through the various mechanisms, whilst Figure 6

illustrates some of the challenges inherent within each . It continues with a discussion as to how aware they are of the need to include information on school communities in their decision making processes and examines the evidence relating to this aspect of the study.

1.Mechanisms	2.Internal (I) or external (I) Trustee Board or Local Board (TB,AB)	3.Opportunities arising through accounts
1. Clerking carried out by single clerk for whole mat.	(I) TB	A single clerk can act as information conduit throughout the MAT. They also become very familiar with policies and can help duplicate practices throughout the MAT. They can also highlight areas of concern which are common to MATS within the trust
2.Chairs of Academy Boards also acting trustees	(I) TB, AB	They are equipped with information at a local level and can convey this to the Trustee Board.
3.Parent surveys carried out at local level and the results harvested by both Academy Boards and Trustees	(I) TB, AB	Allows parents in local communities to communicate with trustees and local Academy Boards.
4.Elected parents on Trustee Boards	(I) TB	Allows for the parent voice on Trustee Board.
5.Elected parents on Academy Boards	(I) AB	Allows for parent voice on Academy Board.
6.Information flow through management structures (i.e. via CEO and Senior Management teams within individual schools	(I) TB /AB	Important information with regard to teaching and learning conveyed both upwards through the organization to the board of trustees, and downwards through the organization to Academy Boards.
7.Inclusion of teachers on Academy Boards and Trustee Boards	(I) TB AB	-Teachers are an excellent source of community knowledge and often have detailed information on pupils, their background and communities. -Teachers more likely to have been drawn from local communities
8.Head of Governance for Trust	(I) TB	Paid full time role. Allows adequate time to be spent on training and development of board members; arranging of interschool meetings for board members and Head teachers. Capacity to cascade good practice throughout the trust.
9.Creation of governance structures that encourage information flow	(I) TB	This may include creation of cluster boards to represent particular groups of schools – for example one of the MATs under scrutiny had a number of schools in the same socio economically deprived location, so created a cluster board to oversee all schools in this area. - Good way to information share, particularly in the case of challenges encountered by particular schools i.e. multiple language communities, large traveller communities. -May be highly influential in terms of strategic development of the trust.
10.Members co-opted due to links with local community	(E)	-Individuals co-opted due to local knowledge, for example councillors, religious leaders. These individuals often have a keen sense of communities and their issues and may be a rich source of local knowledge.
11. Formal communication strategy	E and I TB	-Formal communication strategy document which must include governance in order to be effective. -Must contain strategies and mechanisms to feed up as well as downward. *The communication plans , where present, did not always reflect governance structures.*
11.Create a position as Head of Communications for the trust	(E) and may be (I) TB	Professional employed to work on communications throughout the trust – both internal and external.
12.Head teacher /Senior leadership members sit on boards of community associations	(E) TB AB	Excellent source of information on local communities and their needs.

Figure 5 Opportunities arising , through accounts

1.Mechanisms	2.Internal (I) or external (E) TrusteeBoard(TB).Local Board((LB_	4.Challenges arising through accounts.
1. Clerking carried out by single clerk for whole mat.	(I) TB	-Recruiting and retaining good clerks. -Ensuring that clerk is disinterested party. -Often clerks are employed within the MAT in other roles – this may create a conflict of interest. -Clerk may not have the authority /confidence to carry out the coordinating role.
2.Chairs of Academy Boards also acting trustees	(I) TB, AB	This is very time consuming for the individual and may result in some distortion of information in the form of observations and commentary by these individuals that may be based on opinion rather than fact. Information may in some cases be one way i.e. flowing down from the Trustee Board to the Academy Local Board, but not the converse.
3.Parent surveys carried out at local level and the results harvested by both Academy Boards and Trustees	(I) TB, AB	-Very often poor response rate, particularly in deprived communities. -Questions limiting and often do not allow participants to raise important issues that may be politically sensitive
4.Elected parents on Trustee Boards	(I) TB	-Parents are only likely to have intimate knowledge of a single community, so fairly limited input -Parent contribution may be less valued than professional skills, on Trustee Boards. -Parent knowledge often classed as 'anecdotal' (see Wilkins, 2016).
5.Elected parents on Academy Boards	(I) AB	-Parent may or may not have knowledge of community. -Parent input may not be relayed upwards to trust boards. - Parent knowledge often classed as 'anecdotal' (see Wilkins, 2016). -Parents have no actual constituency- no formal mechanism for consulting their communities. This has often caused confusion in terms of their role (see Baxter, 2016).
6.Information flow through management structures (i.e. via CEO and Senior Management	(I) TB /AB	-May focus on teaching and learning and be relatively quantitative in nature. -May not include information about school communities, or if it does, may lack substance due to lack of community engagement on the part of head teachers /Senior leadership teams who may have been recruited out of catchment. -Board may side line this as 'staff responsibility' (see Ehren et al, 2016).
7.Inclusion of teachers on Academy Boards and Trustee Boards	(I) TB AB	-Teachers unlikely to sit as trustees unless cooped onto board. -Teacher representatives on Academy Boards may furnish the board with information about school communities, but this may stop there if the relationship between school and central MAT is not good. -Teacher input may be limited due to hierarchical relationship with CEO /principal. May duck out of sensitive issues.
8.Head of Governance for Trust	(I) TB	-May not have any links to local communities. -May be powerful in creating connections between boards but this does not necessarily extend to information flow. -Will almost always have the trust board's interests at heart as they are employed by the trust and will be sensitive to hierarchy. -May be overly focused on monitoring/accountability elements of governance
9.Creation of governance structures that encourage information flow	(I) TB	-Creates an extra layer of management and governance. This may put further distance between schools and trustees at the apex of the organisation. -Can become overly powerful in terms of the governance structure. May be highly influential in blocking central policies and practices.
10.Members co-opted due to links with local community	(E)	May bring other agendas to the fore: political, religious.
11. Formal communication strategy	E and I TB	-May only be designed with staff in mind. -Lacks feed upward mechanisms and just becomes a 'cascade document' -Policy created then side-lined by boards due to other pressures on their time.
11.Create a position as Head of Communications for the trust	(E) and may be (I) TB	May be more concerned with outward facing communication, marketing etc. than focused on internal coms. Not normally associated with boards at local level.
12.Head teacher /Senior leadership members sit on boards of community associations	(E) TB AB	Easier for local academy heads to do than those positioned at the apex of the organisation. Key issue in exactly how this community knowledge is incorporated into local school strategy and also the MAT Trustee Board.
13.Parent meetings	(E) TB AB	Attendance can be low, particularly in challenging areas. Often the same parents show up, whilst parents from particular communities and ethnicities may not be so keen to attend.
15.CEO/ Chair visits to community organisations	(I) (E) TB/AB	-May be difficult to penetrate (i,e traveller communities) -Sensitive issues may be brushed under the carpet in what is seen as 'official visit'. -Dialogue must be maintained in order to be effective. Communities must see some sort of action on problems they have highlighted. -Important not to permit some communities dominate at the expense of others (as for example in Trojan Horse Affair (See Baxter, 2016).

Figure 6 Challenges arising through accounts

Overall, boards were aware of the need to incorporate information from communities into their deliberations and cited several ways in which they were doing this, for example: parent surveys, parents as ABMs, staff attending community meetings. However, what was not clear was whether and how this information was being relayed to trust level and formally incorporated into discussions and decisions. Trustees expressed their frustration in terms of the lack of clarity in this area, one trustee reporting: 'It's just not clear how we [trustees] communicate with schools, it hasn't been resolved.' (TBM-MAT 02). Fifteen of the trustees interviewed said they felt out of touch with schools in the MAT, and in some cases found the new role difficult because of this: 'We were involved before [when the school was standalone], now, it feels different, remote you could say.' (TBM-MAT 01). Attempts to bring together layers of governance were proving successful, according to those who organised these events, but again, the ways in which these events were helping trustees to tap into community concerns and what is done with the information gained during these events, was not clear.

Although the study revealed that in all of the MATs arrangements were in place to provide information flow through management structures, it was clear from the interviews that this did not always mean that boards as a whole were better informed, one trustee stating, 'these conversations go on between heads and executive… as a board we are excluded from them.' (TBM-MAT 3). None of the organizations had communication plans that included boards, in place at the time they were interviewed, and one board member pointed out that, 'communications between the core team and the governors is pretty non-existent.' (TBM – Chair , MAT 2). Another trustee agreed that a

communication plan that included boards was a good idea, but that, 'the CEO just isn't interested.' (TBM-MAT 4), even though the trustee had been suggesting it for some time. These points appear in Figure . The detractors are grouped into four broad themes summarized in figure 7 and discussed later in the paper.

Schemes of delegation emerged as a key management tool in terms of establishing the multi-level governance structure and the power of Academy Boards. This echoes research in other sectors which argues that structures and processes are key to understanding federated organizations (Stone, et al 2010). There were two key trends observed across the trusts: The first concerned MATs that were relatively mature (over 5 years old). In the case of these MATs, the schemes of delegation had predominantly become a work in progress, to be altered according to the level and capacity of schools joining the MAT:

> As new schools come on Board, if they are failing, their governance is probably in a bit of a state, so then we say, ok well they won't have decision making powers on say finance, for a while, but then […] when they improve then, yes, we would give them more say…[..] it's a meritocratic approach (CT, MAT 2)

The second concerned Boards in less mature MATs (less than 5 years old), who tended to see their schemes of delegation in more concrete terms: less flexible and more fixed. As they were at an earlier stage in their evolution it was not yet apparent to them what the implications of these early decisions would be. Evolving structures in response to changing contexts indicates organisational capacity to learn and evolve (Miles, 1982). This ability to flex and evolve schemes of delegation reflects the changing power dynamic with and between Boards in evolving MATs, but may also be indicative of future capacity to adapt to changing circumstances. The ability of collaborations across public services to flex and be responsive to changing environments has been linked to their longevity (Hartley and Allison 2002), although the evidence is not conclusive. However, it was not clear in this study whether the lack of flexibility with regard to adapting schemes of delegation was due to the relative early stage of evolution of particular MATs, or whether this was reflective of an attitude or stance within the trust board/management team.

Schemes of delegation were being used to create new levels of governance to cope with having schools in different localities. Two MATs were in the process of putting in place regional Boards that were tasked with managing Academy Boards in particular locations. This reflects a broader national pattern of MATs that straddle more than one area (Salokangas and Chapman 2014). The changing nature of power delegated to Academy Boards is also indicative of the extent to which individual schools may retain their identity or adopt that of the sponsoring or lead organization. This was partly explored by Salonkangas and Chapman (2014), who found tensions in terms of schools' wish to retain an individual identity and the wish to feel a part of the wider organization. This uniformity/conformity versus autonomy tension has been explored extensively in inter-organisational collaborations(e.g. Beech and Huxham, 2003) and is clearly an issue which needs to be interrogated more widely in the case of MATS. As this Chair of Trustees (TBM) noted:

It was hard work at first, like herding cats, but we are getting over those individual school's resistance now, but it's a work in progress. (TBM Chair - MAT 3).

The degree of autonomy and responsibility delegated to MATs and their ability to input into higher level decision making varied. For example: in the case of MAT 4 the Chair of Trustees reported that, 'a few MATs have taken away the responsibility from Academy Boards and we can't do that, we've a number of communities and they are all very different, different needs, so it's vital that we have a mechanism for hearing what the community feels like.' (CT-MAT 05). In this case the MAT viewed that depriving Academy Boards of decision-making responsibility would negatively impact on its

capacity and motivation to share information that is instrumental to strategic decision making. Thus, eroding long term trust between the Board of Trustees and Academy Boards /Head teachers.

The area of trust was a key term throughout the interviews, linking strongly to reciprocity in relationships between Trust Boards and Academy Boards. This extended beyond structures and schemes of delegation (see Authors, 2019), but was also a key element in terms of governance structures. The meritocratic approach mentioned earlier was largely dependent upon the degree of trust shown by the Trustee Board in the local Academy Boards. There was also a view that Academy Boards could be trusted to know their own communities, but it did not necessarily follow that they would then relay this information to Trustee Board level. However, trustees who mentioned this aspect, came from MATs where some academy boards were perceived to be low performing. In these cases, trustees also sat on the local Board (one in the capacity of chair), this appeared to be a compensatory strategy in order to raise trust and capacity in poorly performing boards.
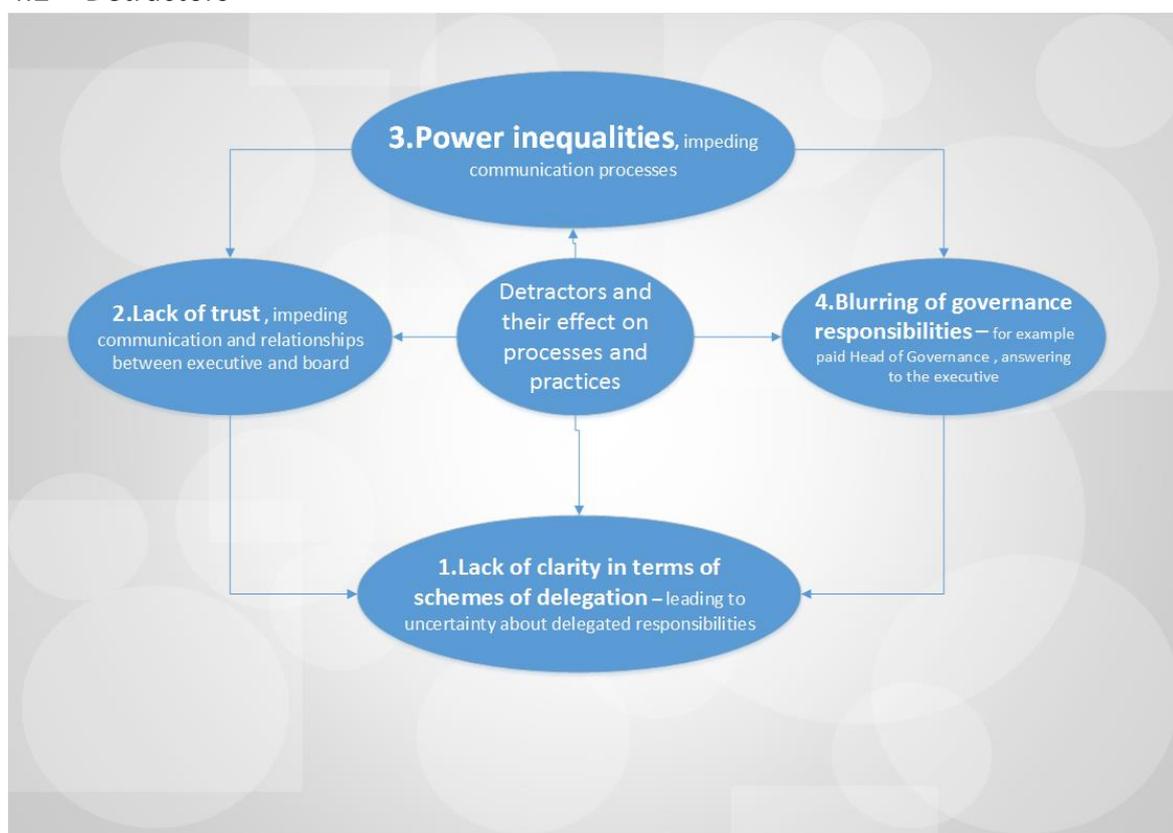
4.2   Detractors

Figure 7 Detractors grouped by theme

Figure 7 illustrates the elements that appear to be getting in the way of good practices and structures in community engagement. The first is the lack of clarity around schemes of delegation :Although all MATs in the sample had a scheme of delegation, they were not always made clear, particularly to Academy level boards, who were often labouring under the illusion that they had the similar powers to when their schools were stand alone, as this AB member pointed out, 'Sometimes I wonder what we are here for.' (ABM- MAT 5). This clarity of schemes of delegation and the role of ABMs is worthy of further exploration as powers delegated to local boards are complex and vary a great deal (see Authors, 2019). The second area for consideration is the apparent lack of trust between layers of governance. As noted above lack of trust can arise when there is a lack of clarity on decision making powers of academy boards, where academy boards feel their role is being undermined or their views are not taken into account. Trust can also be an issue related to the very difficult task of bringing existing governing bodies into the MAT because their schools were failing. In these cases , where the

board is not replaced, the members may not be competent in terms of their role, as this trustee pointed out: 'If you don't have confident assertive and experienced governors then they'll never find a way of solving problems, and…..you can have a really experienced head but if they have only ever been used to bad governing bodies they will be by default, nervous about them.' (TBM- MAT 02).

Alongside trust issues, the professionalization of governance has gained momentum since the growth of MATs, with MATs creating new management positions, for example, Head of Governance. Two out of the six MATS had done this, whilst the other four were considering it. (aspect 3 Figure 5). This has obvious operational advantages-creating and maintaining good systems around governance is time consuming and requires constant maintenance – as Cornforth points out (2015). But creating a Head of Governance who reports directly to the CEO creates a blurring of the boundaries between governance and senior management. This was not the only evidence of this trait, with some trustees expressing concern at the level of intervention of the CEO in governance matters. There was also evidence that trustees acting as chair of local Academy Boards was problematic in terms of conflicts of interest, as this ABM pointed out, 'You know every board I know [of a MAT] couldn't exist if someone didn't double their hat, but it is not always wise to join functions…it can suppress certain info.' (TMB and ABC- MAT 05): This and contributions from other ABMs indicated that they were reluctant to discuss particular issues in front of trustees. This is concerning, particularly as another study within the same project, investigating powers of ABMs, revealed that out of 15 MATS only one ABM had the power to question whether the individual academy was getting value for money from the trust (see Authors, 2019) .

The final detractor concerns the considerable power imbalances in MATs in this sample. These emerged due to the three detractors mentioned already, along with the issue of how schools are brought into the MAT. As mentioned earlier, failing schools are very often given no choice about joining a MAT, in order to improve results. But there are considerable issues to overcome if the school is to feel fully part of the organisation. Loss of power and identity are just one of the areas mentioned by ABMs and the difficulties of managing and governing weak schools infused the transcripts of all respondents in the study, as this example illustrates: 'If you don't handle that well [inclusion of an incoming school] boards feel emasculated and ground down by what is to be done…I go into boards where they have 27 things on their agenda and spend 20 mins on how the kids are doing.' (TBM-MAT 06).

Nearly all respondents interviewed for this study felt that schools should retain certain levels of autonomy; however, Trustee Boards all believed that this should be earned, by schools, by, a) demonstrating they could remain within budget, and b) showing that they reflect the aims (and values) of the organization overall. Academy Board Members at local level appeared anxious that their organizational identities should contribute to the MAT, whilst not being swallowed up by the identity of the parent organization. This was a particular tension within two of the MATs, in which Academy Board Members believed that whilst a certain level of standardization of values was fine, that their trust was imposing too much standardization, thus inhibiting innovation at school level.

> But as soon as [schools] come to this trust environment then they realised that actually the master they're reporting to now is probably more challenging and more controlling than the local authority was. So, it's be careful what you wish for isn't it ? (ABM-MAT 04)

This is an important finding as it affects both process and trust between levels of governance. If trust between levels begins to erode, it is likely to undermine the relationship. The study also reflected that trust is an issue between TBMs/ABMs and staff, with feelings that both are being left out of important communication loops :

And I think as a board, I think to a degree we're excluded from it [communication], primarily because that conversation seems to go on with executive... Well it goes on at the operational between executive heads and CEOs. (TBM-MAT 04)

This lack of trust appears to emanate partly from a lack of information flow within the trust, as the participant accounts reflected, and partly from confidence that Academy Board Members' opinions were valued in the same way as Trustee Boards Members'.

Although there was ample evidence that MATs were actively looking for schools that shared their values, there was little evidence in this study, that existing school values could enrich those of the MAT . Yet we did find some evidence of schools that felt that their values needed to be taken into account when the DFE is selecting sponsors for them, as this ABM explains: 'I suggested to the head that perhaps we should look proactively for a sponsor that was more of our ethos and it's sad really because the school was looking to become part of a collaborative Trust and just hadn't got around to it before Ofsted came in [and decided for us] (ABM-MAT-02).

5   Conclusions and implications for theory and practice.

This paper set out to examine how deconcentration policies in education, resulting in the development of, multi-academy trust schools (MATs) in England have impacted on the extent to which, schools look to serve local community needs, investigating (a) to what extent are boards in multi-academy trusts aware of the need to include information on school communities in their decision-making processes, and if so (b) how they are attempting to do this and (c) what are the implications for how multi-level governance structures ensure they serve local needs.

Section 4 addressed the first two research questions, in this the concluding section of the paper we explore implications both for theory and practice.

This study was limited in that it draws on a very small sample of schools , to interrogate a particular focus area. It was also limited in its capacity to draw on the experiences of school level board members (ABMs). Gaining access to these individuals proved difficult in all but 2 MATs , either due to gatekeeper limitations – MATs not wishing to permit access to this level of governance, or because these people were reluctant to be interviewed. However, limited thought it was, it offers a number of useful insights for practice and, for further research, the implications of which, are discussed below.

The paper revealed that whilst trustee boards appeared to view school operations from a lifeworld perspective (Hargreaves, 2009), that their operational focus was very heavily focused on a system world approach- conditioned by results. The lack of coherent communication systems between different levels of governance, and communities, raises questions about the ability of MATs to take account of local community needs and build future social capital in communities, (Campbell, 2005). This is largely because information on the needs of these communities may not be reaching the trustee level of governance. This study has shown that the OECD (2006) statement that, information on the character, climate and particular needs of schools, should form part of decision making processes, in reality is proving challenging for MATs. Particularly in relation to creation of an effective system of ensuring information about local school communities is relayed upwards and a coherent communication strategy for inter-level communication. This is an important finding in relation to MAT processes and procedures. To improve this aspect would help MATs to involve citizens in important educational decisions made by the MAT. It would also, in terms of Hirchman's (1978), voice, choice, contribution and control, give a voice to communities that are clearly not being heard at the apex of the organisation, a phenomenon that negatively impacts on the extent to which academy level boards and their stakeholders, can contribute to or control organizational outcomes. Community contributions and control are also limited by the metaphorical and actual distance between the

communities and central board of trustees. In relation to MATs it limits the amount that citizens can contribute, in order to increase the quality and effectiveness of public services, (Cinquini, 2017).

The research contributes to the literature on multi-level governance, in focusing in on an important but neglected area: communication plans and strategy between levels of governance and organizational stakeholders: in this case , school communities. It does so by illustrating that whilst this area has received attention in the leadership literature, it has not been a focus in the very specific context of multi-level governing boards, who necessarily operate at some distance from the organization. It also echo's Gunnarsson's work in raising questions as to the level of local accountability that it is possible for a community to exert, in large organisations where the apex of the organisations is distant form the communities it serves. This point also emerged in the work of Ehren & Godfrey (2017) and Ehren & Perryman, (2018), and has been raised in relation to the charter school movement in the USA – particularly in those charters that cross state borders – and in relation to equity and inclusion (Finnigan, 2007; Wells, 2002). Another important contribution to literature relates to values and trust, and Coleman's argument that they emerge from the value systems that arise from the communities in which they are situated. If the values system flows downwards from trustee boards, as some of the findings suggest, then this could be highly problematic if this then clashes with individual school values and aims. In cases where schools have willingly joined MATS this would not be such a problem, but for those schools that have been mandated to join, this value and cultural clash could prove detrimental in the longer term, as research across the public and third sector ,on collaborations, has shown (Huxham and Vangen, 2013). Vangen and Huxham's work in highlights the whole area of trust between organizations in collaborations, but there is little work on trust between levels of governance in organizations. This research indicates that this is necessary, in order to ascertain overall functionality of the grouping.

In, in addition, in relation to future research, the paper also indicates that more work needs to be done in investigating the communities in which schools are situated, whilst also doing more forensic research in schools belonging to large MATs. Whilst access to schools may be difficult , particularly in relation to failing MATs , this should not prevent reserachers from trying, particularly given the high stakes cost of MAT failure and the future of public education in England. Any such larger study should focus attention on some of the questions emanating from this study, namely: How do academy level boards feel that the needs of their school communities are being met by the wider trust ? What factors inhibit information sharing between boards and staff (at MAT and academy board level). It would also be very fruitful to investigate how well parents parents and other school stakeholders, feel that schools in MATs are serving the needs of their communities.

6   References

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7 Appendix 01

7.1 Questions

1. What is your role in the MAT
2. Do you have any relationship with Ofsted and regional Commissioners, if so what?
3. Do you have plans to expand? If so what is driving these plans? How do you get the relevant information to drive these plans?
4. Do you have a strategic development plan (if so can we see it – this is potentially a good source of additional data)?
5. Do you consult with other schools when thinking of expanding? If so how?
6. What are the major strategic challenges facing your MAT at present and in the future, in your opinion?
7. What kind of formal communication methods are have you developed within the MAT a) for staff b) for trustees and academy governors?
8. How are these working in practice?
9. What role have trustees and academy governors in developing strategic plans for the whole MAT.
10. What are the key drivers for MAT strategy as you see them?
11. What are the nature of the relationships between levels of governance in MATs
12. Who appoints the heads of each school?
13. What areas do you see to be weakest in terms of strategy formation?
14. How do boards communicate with parents and other stakeholders within the individual school communities?
15. How do you relay this communication /information between schools and up to board of trustees?
16. And/or how is the responsibility for strategy-making shared with schools?

17. Who is the MAT accountable to?

18. What prompts and drives strategy making in your MAT?

19. How do you approach strategy making in the MAT? Tell me about a strategy for the MAT you are currently implementing.

20. Who do you see as the MAT's main stakeholders? How do they influence strategy? How does the MAT take account of the different circumstances and challenges that schools have?

21. To what extent are schools able to develop their own strategies to meet the part particular challenges they face?

22. What other sources/information do you draw on to inform your strategies?

23. How do you obtain this information?

24. What are the respective roles of the chair, CEO and full board in strategy making?

25. What have you learnt about MAT strategy making since you joined the board?

26. What are/have been your most successful strategies – and why?

27. What are the particular challenges for your MAT? If/why do these need a strategic approach?

28. What have been the biggest barriers to strategy making?

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