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New-In-Post Leaders in Challenging Contexts: School Improvement Trajectories and the Emerging Dynamics of Stakeholders within Multi-Academy Trusts in England

Maria Kaparou

Southampton Education School, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK



ABSTRACT

This article draws on empirical evidence collected from new-in-post leaders in schools in challenging contexts which are part of different Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) in England. It explores the school improvement trajectory of trust schools. It seeks to understand trust leaders' emerging dynamics and power relationships, which followed the interplay of loose and tight coupling that could influence decision making for school improvement. Data were collected on three rounds of semi-structured interviews with members of senior leadership teams of primary and secondary schools, alongside the analysis of internal and external documents. Findings show that new-in-post leaders worked on multiple strands of improvement activity simultaneously, with these strands often layered upon one another. Schools in challenging contexts operating within a trust show evidence of loose and tight coupling, while retaining a decentralized identity. Where the trusts expect new-in-post leaders to adopt more hierarchically controlled decision making and implementation (e.g. curriculum development, monitoring progress), concerns were raised about the effect of standardization and levels of autonomy in meeting individual schools' needs. The results have potential to inform policy, research, and practice within multigroup schools in challenging contexts.

Introduction

As a result of the transformation of the public education sector in England through academization [e.g., academies, free schools in early 2000s; academies and multi-academy trusts (MATs) in 2010, 2016, 2022], new organizational structures have begun to reshape the educational landscape with the intention to enhance school autonomy and turn around failing schools (Department for Education (DfE), 2016a). Since the emergence of academies within the English landscape, there has been a rapid expansion of MATs, recording around 1,200 MATs operating around 7,600 academies, amounting to more than a third of all schools, and educating about half of all pupils in England (Gov.uk, 2023).

The conservative-led coalition government advocated a market-oriented reform, which is based on the charter schools in the United States and free schools in Sweden whilst this tends to be an integral part of school improvement policies internationally. Organizational structures have reconfigured toward corporate structures characterized by a higher level of performance management regimes, high-stake assessment, market-driven approaches, and high levels of pressure on schools to improve. This might suggest changes in leadership and management enactment at school and system levels. Woods et al. (2007, p. 238) argue that "Academies are hybrid organizations intended to constitute spaces in which this entrepreneurial imperative can flourish." Policy in England (White Paper 2016a, 2022) has been influential in respect to the need for leaders of MAT schools to develop system leadership skills necessary to lead independent state schools within a self-improving school system. Despite the policy intentions of providing more freedoms, autonomy, and greater leadership, the academization policy enactment has given rise to controversy at international level given the limited evidence of improving outcomes, particularly for pupils from socially

CONTACT Maria Kaparou  M.Kaparou@soton.ac.uk  Southampton Education School, University of Southampton, University Road, Highfield Campus, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK

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disadvantaged backgrounds, and bringing about the improvement of underperforming schools (e.g., Malone et al., 2021; Simon et al., 2021).

Closing the gap in academic performance has grown interest in charter schools—the U.S. model of improvement approach equivalent to MATs—as an education reform to turn around failing schools. Potentially this could offer the scope for tackling underperformance and “inequality in education in socially deprived areas” (Hatcher, 2011, p. 494). Whilst school leaders of charter management organizations and other multi-school organizations in the United States have been encouraged by policies to enact strategies to improve students’ outcomes, “studies have indicated that few school leaders taking on the work of turnaround succeed in raising and sustaining performance above the fiftieth percentile of schools” (Fleischman and Heppen 2009; Hurlburt et al. 2011; Le Floch et al. 2016, in Malone et al., 2021, p. 352).

An earlier report from the Stanford Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO, 2010) suggests that there has not been significant benefit for special education students and English language learners in charter schools in reading and math, whilst students in poverty show no significant difference in math. As Ladd and Fiske (2016, p. 8) claim, “while some CMOs, such as the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) that operates more than 200 schools in 20 states and the District of Columbia, have earned praise for the quality of their curricula and academic support services, many others are far less effective.”

Despite the contextual differences and the implementation of policies within the English and American systems, results from different education systems can be arguably significant and contribute to the narrative of the scope of education policies to drive improvement and tackle performance inequality in the most deprived areas of a country. Greany and McGinity (2021, p. 312) argue that analyses of various studies assessing the performance of MATs (e.g., Andrews, 2018; Hutchings and Francis, 2017) indicate a wide variation in performance and that the MAT “sector as a whole is performing at or slightly below the national average.” Although there is limited evidence of the impact of academies upon the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, Hutchings et al’s (2014: 28) work for the Sutton Trust attempts to address this gap, while it reveals that sponsored academies, on average, showed greater improvement than mainstream schools (improving by 7.3% compared with 4.2% for all maintained schools). The House of Commons Select Committee on Education report on academies was more guarded, stating: *Academisation is not always successful nor is it the only proven alternative for a struggling school.* (2015, para 209)

Bringing about the improvement of schools in challenging contexts which operate within a MAT structure has not been the subject of extensive research. This article aims to fill in this gap in the literature whilst adding to the knowledge base of the discourse about the new-in-post principals’ activities (e.g., Crawford & Cowie, 2012; Crow, 2007) for school improvement, as a result of MAT policy implementation in schools in challenging contexts. The results reported in this article are part of a larger funded project supported by Ambition Institute. Which explored the processes that new-in-post principals used to diagnose and prioritize school improvement planning in their first and second year of headship in a school in challenging contexts. The research was also around the identification of improvement strategies and modes of implementation determined, as well as enabling identification of the main barriers to improvement and monitoring the progress of school improvement.

Since MATs are playing a central role to the English education landscape, this article focuses on new-in-post leaders’ priorities of the improvement trajectory of trust schools in challenging contexts. In response to radical school change and improvement and system-wide policy on academization, the article also seeks to understand trust leaders’ emerging dynamics and power relationships following the interplay of loose and tight coupling characterizing MATs’ model, which could influence decision making for school improvement.

Literature Review

Academization Emergence: Shaking Up the Way That Public Service Works?

There have been numerous reforms at the national level to help raising standards through policy intervention (e.g., Department for Education [DfE], 2016a, 2016b, 2022). The government emphasis of “driving up standards” through the expansion of academies which aim “to address entrenched failure in schools with low performance” (p. 24) shifted its focus toward increasing school autonomy through school-to-school support and peer-learning (DfE, 2010). It seems that government proposals for a school system based on multi-schools groups, such as MATs, “intend to liberate schools from the bureaucracy of local government influence” (Armstrong & Ainscow, 2018, p. 2). As a result, this might suggest a structural change of governance while the level of autonomy in a self-improving system might be constrained by the macro policy and meso (Trust) policy mandates. A self-improving school system requires that all leaders in the school system adopt the philosophy and practice of system leadership (Hargreaves, 2011a, p. 24). Whilst school improvement has become “a collective responsibility of the school system” (Simon et al., 2021, p. 114), the emergence of Multi-Academy Trusts to enhance school-to-school support was a preferred direction to the coalition government’s policy intentions. This raises fundamental questions about the evolving role of system leadership within MATs to ensure a strategic direction for supporting a “self-improving, school-led system” (DfE, 2010) to grow. The White Paper *Opportunity for All* (March 2022) and the guidance document outlining expectations to a trust-led system confirm that “a strong trust [family of schools]” are considered the pathway to deliver better outcomes for children (DfE, 2022, p. 43), especially for disadvantaged children.

The shift to a trust-led system might imply the government intention to “develop tailored information and leadership training and provide greater opportunities for MATs to involve business expertise (Department for Education [DfE], 2016a, p. 83). Similar to several public sector organizations (e.g., National Health Service) and other industries (e.g., banking services, hospitality), the role of senior leaders of schools and MATs has shifted from managing a single site toward operating as unit managers within a multilayered net of education organizations (schools) within the same trust. Ball (2009, p. 101) has rightly pointed out that “Academies are one ‘move’ in a more general process of ‘destatisation’—tasks and services previously undertaken by the state are now being done by various ‘others’ in various kinds of relationships.” Practices in MATs are drawn from business as they market concepts of performance, utilizing data for pupils’ scores and staff performance, financial information, and human resources (HR). Woods et al. (2007, p. 254) make the point that “in turn, public education, through new relationships with private sponsors, provides the potential to generate capital (skills, attitudes, beliefs, etc.) of value (to some) in the economic and cultural fields. This is neither a simple nor an equal exchange.” MATs and multiunit organizations operate so that they can potentially secure economies of scale (e.g., through central HR or finance systems). The MAT policy agenda can be implemented within an enterprise culture which requires features drawn from the private sector, such as establishing organizational innovation and market competition. However, Glatter (2020, p. 9) supports that “the actual picture [of the academy programme] is far more diverse . . . [and] this development appears to be having an impact on equity [whilst an OECD review (2010) showed that] introducing market mechanisms in education does not tend to generate innovation, it can increase social segregation and the evidence showed no link to improved teaching and learning.”

Leadership in Schools in Challenging Contexts

Improving teaching and learning has been a long-standing feature in schools with high-stakes accountability regimes in England. Despite numerous reform efforts at national and regional levels to help raise educational standards through policy interventions (such as academization of schools), “schools failing to meet these standards or ‘floor targets’ and those serving socio-economically disadvantaged communities have become known as schools facing challenging circumstances” (Chapman & Harris, 2004, p. 219). The contribution of leadership to school improvement is widely acknowledged. Through advances in analyzing the effectiveness of schools, it is now accepted that good leadership from head teachers is important to both school- and student-level performance (Kelly & Saunders, 2010). Research literature shows that high-quality professional learning requires an instructional leadership orientation (e.g., Kaparou & Bush, 2016; Day et al,

2009; Leithwood et al., 2006; Robinson et al., 2008; Swaffield & MacBeath, 2009). Day's (2005) research on 10 successful, experienced head teachers in schools in challenging circumstances is in line with the work of Hopkins (2001), which revealed the centrality of learning-centered leadership practices in achieving school improvement in schools facing challenging circumstances but further highlights a role for transformational leadership. A report for (NCSL) (Keys et al., 2003) also brings in transformational leadership as complementary to instructional leadership for delivering improvement. Similarly, Ofsted's (2009) report on 12 outstanding schools in England in challenging circumstances contributes to the literature on effective schools, in terms of identifying how these schools have succeeded and sustained success, in line with Muijs et al. (2004) and Day and Sammons (2014), highlighting evidence which shows that effective head teachers draw equally on elements of both instructional and transformational leadership.

However, the current policy context may be a platform for debate about the need and the evolving nature of other system leaders taking on these roles, for example, within a MAT. Part of this is that national or local leaders are gaining additional responsibility and power, while individual headteachers gain additional layers of accountability to ensure that those policies are followed at the school level to reach school improvement. Christensen (2023, p. 2) states that "the development of theories of power serves as tools for understanding and conceptualizing the complexity of what "people actually do" (Gledhill, 2009; Thurston & Fernandez-Gotz, 2021). Gunter and Courtney (2023, p. 363) argue that "enactment is about educational professionals delivering national policy demands and producing evidence of compliance and outcomes, inter played with localised autonomy regarding responding to context and notably to parental needs for their child." The mediating role of leaders' instructional leadership role in the enactment of accountability policies related to curriculum, pedagogy and data monitoring determines their actions to drive up standards in a "self-improving" and "school-led" system (Constantinides, 2022a).

What Do We Know About New-In-Post Leaders?

Not only is there pressure for principals in their first years of appointment to configure their professional identities, but there is also pressure to reshape to the school culture and develop a strategic ability and political insight (Cowie & Crawford, 2008; Gronn & Lacey, 2004; Lee-Piggott, 2016). Novice principals' agility to respond to rapid changes in accordance to policy regimes is underpinned by the support of their networks. However, earlier conceptual and empirical studies (Day, 2003; Hobson et al., 2002; Holligan et al., 2006; Walker & Qian, 2006) have shown that new headship is linked to a feeling of professional isolation and loneliness whilst new heads experience uncertainty and low confidence dealing with streams of school improvement with close consideration given to managing priorities and the school budget, dealing with ineffective staff, and implementing new government initiatives. Issues identified in relevant studies at the dawn of the new millenium are not significantly different to later studies given the high expectations of leaders to meet the actual needs of the job in such a high-stakes accountability culture. Earley et al.'s (2011) National College for School Leadership (NCSL) research study exploring urban school leaders' headship experience (five new heads from London, one new head from Midlands inner-city, and six more experienced heads reflecting on the early years of headship) and the core challenges they have faced in their first year of headship practice is not dissimilar to the international literature (e.g., Lee-Piggott, 2016, in Trinidad and Tobago) beyond the additional context-dependent challenges (e.g., restrictions and problems associated to developing countries) and any "contextual influences" such as an imposed curriculum reform and developmental stage of the school (Cheung & Walker, 2006, in Hong Kong). This might suggest a need to offer a stronger mechanism of support to leaders via ongoing professional development and network communities and this might help to tackle the shortage of principals in schools.

A seminal study, published in Cowie and Crawford (2008) and Crawford and Cowie (2012), draws on research undertaken in Scotland as part of an International Study of Principal Preparation (ISPP) and examines how useful principal preparation programs are for novice headteachers in their first, second, and third year of appointment in primary schools. New heads and their needs change quickly in the early years of headship, and this is a result of their own sets of beliefs and expectations whilst new professional identity formation has been enhanced through supportive networks developed in the preparation programs and beyond (Crawford & Cowie, 2012, p. 178; 180; Earley & Weindling, 2004; Weindling & Dimmock, 2006). Similarly to Gronn and Lacey's (2004, p. 421) research report of the ITPA (Identifying and Tracking

Principal Aspirants Project) of aspiring primary and secondary school principals in Australia, aspiring principals recognize they are on a journey of reconstructing their professional identities in response to the challenges anticipated in headship. Crow (2006, p. 319) has suggested that openness to “change in the priorities of the principal’s tasks, and change in what constitutes an effective organization” and a change in a head’s personal identity and completion of a year or so in post is only the beginning of a much longer socialization process (Crawford & Cowie, 2012, p. 181). New heads to the post argued a leadership spin in their practice in their second year of headship compared to a management focus at an early stage, as well as engaging staff to ensure continuous improvement. There is a growing body of knowledge about the newly appointed principals’ transition through different phases. In Cheung and Walker’s (2006) research of beginning secondary schools principals in Hong Kong, data showed that the exercise of leadership shifted direction as a result of their success and failures on the job within a reforming environment. Coping with multifaceted demands is a key responsibility of principalship, whilst distributing leadership has been an important element in empowering others to contribute to planning for change and improvement at a later phase of headship. However, it is evidenced that the degree of improvement of a school serving a disadvantaged community is dependent on “the nature of school members” responses to their new principals’ leadership (Lee-Piggott, 2016, p. 362).

The current research aims to extend the knowledge base (which has mainly focused on new heads’ leadership preparation, development, and challenges in their new role) by focusing on new-to-the-post leaders’ decisions in school improvement trajectories and power dynamics within multi-group schools, such as the researched schools, as part of MATs.

Phases of School Improvement

Successful school improvement is often reliant on the schools and school leaders being able to implement change (Muijs & Harris, 2006) whilst school improvement may be impeded by barriers hampering the intended changes. As the school effectiveness research has shown, effective leadership has an important role to play in schools, while “this is particularly the case for [schools facing challenging circumstances] (SFCC). In many cases, schools in difficulty can suffer from a sustained lack of direction and can drift.” (Chapman and Harris, 2004: 224). Careful and strategic planning is needed to offset the complex and multifaceted nature of challenge. One of the few studies to consider the sequencing of school improvement activity in a UK context was the impact study (Day et al., 2009) which involved a three-year study of leadership practices and their impact on student outcomes in effective and improving primary schools across England. The four phases of school improvement identified from the study were foundational, developmental, enrichment, and renewal. The researchers identified these phases from the case studies based on how and why some aspects of leadership were considered appropriate at a specific point in time. The foundational phase is most relevant to the research reported here. Day and Sammons (2014, p. 47) had earlier argued that schools in challenging contexts had a particular tendency to focus efforts during this early phase of improvement on student behavior, the physical environment, and the quality of teaching and learning. In the foundational phase, Day et al. (2016, p. 240) identified “layered” leadership practices combining transformational and instructional leadership practice. Transformational practices were focused on motivating colleagues to invest in a shared vision and purpose, as well as developing a “core” senior leadership team. Instructional practices focused on specific elements of practice and processes that were fundamentally linked to the improvement of learning and teaching, such as raising expectations, improving pupil behavior, and using data and research. However, these approaches are not without critique, as mentioned in the discussion section.

A parallel perspective on sequencing was found in the literature on the experience of novice headteachers. Though this literature is relatively sparse and typified by small-scale research adopting a predominantly case study design, several authors have proposed phases for the early-stage career trajectories of novice headteachers. Another UK-based study posited a similar phased-based approach to school improvement. Matthews et al. (2014) focused on the work of headteachers in a core set of 10 primary schools rated “Outstanding” by Ofsted with greater than 90% of students attaining level 4 and above in the 2012 end of KS2 national tests. There was no specific focus on diagnosing and prioritizing school improvement activity within or across the phases, although the study identified the priorities of schools

in some of the different phases, especially those in the rescue phase, which is the clearest parallel to Phase 1 and 2 of Downey et al.'s (2019) study. Matthews et al. (2014, p. 50) also proposed a phased-based framework to improvement trajectory, which they summarized as follows:

Rescue —tackling underperformance.

Reinforcement —securing good.

Refinement —good to outstanding.

Renewal and Replication —sustaining excellence and system improvement.

Overall, Matthews et al. (2014, p. 38) summarized the priorities of rescue schools as tackling underperformance, building a shared vision, aiming for high standards, reshaping the teaching and learning environment, establishing a pupil behavior policy, and appointing, developing, and empowering teachers. Relevant literature in high-performing schools that serve high levels of disadvantaged students reveal the centrality of instructional and transformational leadership as part of their school improvement trajectory to drive change (Harris et al., 2006; West et al., 2005). A recent study of three primary academies in a MAT (Constantinides, 2022a, p. 176) shows that instructional leadership strategies in leaders' daily decisions to initiate and manage school improvement . . . [are affected] by accountability policies."

Greany and McGinity's (2021) article—drawn on case study evidence of Greany's (2018) larger project—reveals varying levels of standardization of MAT leaders' improvement practices across schools, which are captured in five "fundamentals" and five "strategic areas." Greany's DFE report (Greany, 2018, pp. 12–13) on improvement in multi-school groups identify five school improvement "fundamentals" which are "interlinked and operate in tandem":

- (i) Establish school improvement capacity
- (ii) Forensic analysis of school improvement needs
- (iii) Supporting and deploying leadership
- (iv) Access to effective practice and expertise at classroom and department levels
- (v) Monitoring improvement in outcomes and reviewing changes

It was noted that these fundamentals were most apparent in MATs undertaking "turnaround" work to stabilize and repair underperforming schools. Given that educational organizations, such as MATs, face increased demands for accountability, this might suggest that system leaders tend to exhibit tight coupling to centralize authority, standardize practices, monitor improvement, and enhance interdependence.

Significant gaps currently exist in the literature regarding the connection of organizational coupling to leading change and improvement in the journey to improvement. It is timely to move beyond a list of characteristics of effective schools and effective leaders to examine whether it is the sequencing of leadership and school practices, and the manner of implementation of the practices, that makes a difference. Examining the organizational elements which are tied together loosely or tightly to influence decision making, as well as exploring the power dynamics which can support or impede improvement processes, can potentially give us a better understanding of leadership in the current era.

Stakeholders' Dynamics in Organizations

In order to understand stakeholders' dynamics in decision making in the school improvement trajectory in the current research, the analysis builds on the conceptual framework of leadership in schools in challenging contexts, based on an understanding of theories which underpin their approaches to leadership, an analysis of relevant organizational concepts, and how centralization and autonomy operate in trust schools. Whilst the academization move suggests an increased focus on autonomy, greater levels of accountability across the academies groups (DFE, 2016a, 2016b), it creates a debate about the involvement of stakeholders at micro and meso levels in decision making, autonomy, and their influence to MAT strategic planning, and this might be due to high-stakes accountability for schools to demonstrate rapid improvement in the prevalent system.

Similarly to other scholars' attempt to better understand organizational structures (eg., Constantinides, 2022b; Culpin & Male, 2022), this article engages with concepts of organizational

theory to understand the complexity of the management of organizational change for system-level improvement (within MATs) to inform the narrative about the stakeholders' dynamics and power relationships in decision making. In the current article, power relationships are explored through using the concept of coupling. Weick's (1976) seminal work on the concept of loosely coupled organizations helps scholars understand "loose coupling as a situation in which elements are responsive, but retain evidence of separateness and identity" (p. 3) (Weick, 1976, p. 3 in Orton & Weick, 1990, p. 203). The concept of coupling is synonymous to interdependence whilst each element, preserving its own identity, can be "subject to spontaneous changes and preserve some degree of independence and indeterminacy" (Orton & Weick, 1990, p. 204) This might suggest that organizations are connected through shared norms and institutionalized expectations (Meyer, 2002). In contrast, 'tight coupling suggests that different elements are responsive to, but not distinctive from, each other (Orton & Weick, 1990), whilst it emphasizes regulations and tight monitoring toward achieving organizational objectives. Accountability and rigorous assessment of the effectiveness of instructional programs and curriculum are some of the characteristics of tight coupling in educational organizations (Rowan, 2002).

Different educational contexts require different coupling systems as a result of control and organizational hierarchy. Bearing in mind that MATs "perceive themselves as semi-autonomous components" (Culpin & Male, 2022, p. 297), in addition to the geographic spread of MATs, their complex interactions, their semi-autonomous institutional agency, and the contentious nature of power sharing, MATs may be identified as loosely coupled organizations where subsystems are linked and maintain a degree of cohesion (Weick, 1976) but potentially enabling a certain extent of localized adaptation. Given the nature of education organizations, "there is more room available for self-determination by the actors" (Weick, 1976, pp. 7–8). However, many scholars have regarded simultaneous loose and tight coupling as prominent components in effective educational organizations (Goldspink, 2007; Pang, 1998, 2003), whilst Weick (1976, p. 15) argued that "the same components might be at one moment tightly coupled and at the next moment loosely coupled," subject to certain conditions.

Acknowledging that schools within a trust are operating within complex organizational environments, where the power of school moves from the local level (micro) to the meso level, whilst at the same time given a MAT structure, might imply a strict hierarchy and alignments of the schools in the trust under accountability pressures. This could imply a shift from loose coupling toward tight coupling, where MATs operate as tightly coupled organizations through formalization of procedures to direct educational staff, in addition to supporting the assumption of a higher level of centralization, and this would potentially contradict the academization policy intention: *an autonomous and self-improving school system to drive up standards*. This is an area of an ongoing debate among scholars in the field. In a partially decentralized education system, such as in England, it was not a surprise that school leaders (managing one school) were considered significantly autonomous in decision-making powers (OECD, 2011). However, system leaders' involvement in responsibilities for operational and strategic management is not without a critique within the multi-academization landscape. Greany and Higham (2018:12) see this process as one of "chaotic centralization," as power and control moves toward the center, but in uneven and often fraught ways.' Whilst stakeholders in management positions are vested with formal authority over decision making to determine an organization's strategy, research in MATs shows that there is a variation in how trusts operate, some in a highly centralized manner compared to other MATs which are devolved (Greany & McGinity, 2021; Constantinides, 2021, 2022a, 2022b; Culpin & Male, 2022) This variation can be explained by the trust context, size, the social differences of the communities they serve, the school's stage in the improvement trajectory. Male (2022, p. 10) suggests that the change to the involvement of stakeholders in school governance implies their "decreased role [in decision making] which has limited democracy."

Another important feature identified in the literature in multigroup schools is the notion of autonomy as a driver of educational improvement and implications of decentralized or standardization of practices, and this discussion can be controversial, as explained later in the article. In order to explore stakeholder's dynamics, the current research adopted the following definitions as part of the analysis:

- Autonomous practice: "each individual school being able to decide its own approach"
- Aligned practice: "an agreed approach that is widely adopted, but on a voluntary basis"

- Standardized practice: “a single required approach that all schools must adopt” (Greany & McGinity, 2021, pp. 322–23)

Examining autonomy of stakeholders in a self-improving system, Woods et al. (2020, p. 5) argue that a central role is given to “supported autonomy”—that is, “strengthening the infrastructure that supports all schools and their leaders to collaborate effectively” (Department for Education, 2016a, p. 18), enabling “the best headteachers to extend their influence beyond their own schools and help them to raise standards across the system” (ibid, p72). Power dynamics between the CEOs and school leaders can influence the freedom that headteachers have to school improvement priorities, and this depends on the “tightness” or “looseness” of monitoring the accountability policies enactment in trust schools. This article aims to discuss the interplay of loose and tight coupling in new-in-post leaders’ decision making of improvement priorities within trust schools in challenging contexts.

Methodology

A multiple case study design (Yin, 2009) was adopted in the research, which secured the recruitment of 10 (in phase 1 and 2) and eight (in phase 3) new-in-post leaders, holding a range of different roles such as headteacher, executive headteacher, deputy head, and trust leader, involved in securing school improvement in primary and secondary schools. A purposive sample was appropriate given that all of the participants—Ambition Institute participant networks database—had recently entered their post in a school in challenging circumstances, and they were in a position to provide insight into school improvement in a challenging context, defined in terms of low academic progress of students, high economic disadvantage (above average entitlement to free school meals, defined as above 25%) or recent evidence of school underperformance (Ofsted rating of “Requires Improvement” or “Inadequate” in their most recent inspection) Downey et al. (2019)

Publicly available data were gathered from school performance tables, Ofsted reports, school websites, and the Edubase extract about the level of experience of each headteacher and the context of their school, whilst relevant internal documents (e.g. school improvement plans; self-evaluation documents; teaching, learning, and assessment policy; AL Trust report; P school improvement threads) formed part of the data collection.

Multiple interviews created different datasets, and participants had the opportunity to provide insights into their subjective interpretation (Ribbins, 2007) of leadership enactment in school improvement trajectories across these networks of schools, influenced by their experiences, government imperatives, and contextual factors. In the first phase of the study, a semi-structured approach to interviews of senior leaders was adopted, using a framework developed in consultation with the Ambition Institute. The interview schedule focused on leadership of school improvement (SI) regarding leaders’ diagnostics tools and evidence used to inform initial fact-finding, decisions of SI priorities, strategies employed to secure improvement, and sequencing across the year. An initial round of data analysis was used to produce school-level summaries focusing on the experience of the headteacher during their first year in post. A visualization summarizing key aspects of the data was produced for each case in the form of a summary timeline for each headteacher, mapping out their school improvement activity; strategies employed; and barriers encountered across the first year of headship for each of the core strands of school improvement determined at the initial interview. In the second phase of the study, headteachers further discussed some of the themes identified, inquiring about the improvement barriers they have experienced and their approaches to monitoring progress, whilst the summary timelines were used as a visual stimulus for these interviews. The research team used summary timelines as a visual stimulus for Phase 2 interviews, and leaders were asked to check them for accuracy and completeness of content. In the third phase, a follow-up interview was conducted to update the narrative account of eight senior leaders’ experience of leading school improvement through into a second year in post, whilst the interviews also focused on the power relationship of the schools with their MATs and the extent of autonomy levels in management operations, curriculum, and brokering activities for improvement (intelligence exchange). Methodological and respondent triangulation helped to ensure reliability and validity of the findings, despite its limitations. As a way to maintain privacy, MAT, schools, and participants’ real names

were replaced by pseudonyms (letters C, K, P, Pe, M, PDH, PHT, Ph, Re, Ry) to prevent disclosure of identities.

Thematic data analysis was adopted within a multiple case study design under the identified strands of school improvement activities. Comparing and contrasting emerging themes of the data collected in three different phases helped the researchers discuss interactions and complexities of the data, whilst they were verified by engaging with school improvement documents and other publicly available resources. Conducting a rigorous thematic analysis to produce trustworthy findings can be a challenge, given its flexibility and the number of researchers involved in different phases of data collection and analysis. Coresearchers (Phase 1 and 2, for the purpose of the published report and this article) checked preliminary findings and interpretations against the primary data in various team meetings, whilst Phase 3 collection and data analysis were held by two members of the research team for the purpose of this article and dissemination of results at international conferences. Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with participants took place in Phase 2, as discussed earlier. Theoretical and methodological choices helped the research team analyze and interpret findings derived from the data, followed an iterative and reflective process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) where codes and themes were agreed upon and vetted by coresearchers. The credibility of analysis was enhanced by peer debriefing, where the research team systematically engaged with the coding process and datasets in various phases. Conducting a deductive thematic analysis driven by the research theoretical foundations/framework helped the team develop broad codes to organize the data in relation to the research questions, whilst a variety of subthemes were formed inductively. An exploratory nature of data allowed themes to emerge organically. Thematic qualitative data is not bound to either inductive or deductive approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and this suggests flexibility in the richness of data. The publicly available report on Downey et al., (2019) includes detailed methodological description.

Results and Discussion

This section discusses the main findings from the study in relation to the literature and theoretical perspectives reviewed earlier. The research project focuses predominantly on the operational aspects of new-in-post leaders in securing school improvement in schools in challenging contexts. Some patterns were identifiable regarding effective sequencing for school improvement.

New-In-Post leaders' School Improvement Trajectories of Trust Schools in Challenging Contexts

Within the scope of this article, the study results expand our understanding of how new-in-post headteachers and school leaders diagnosed, prioritized, sequenced, selected, and implemented strategies for improvement within challenging school contexts. Some headteachers in schools (e.g., P, K) perceived their school was very much within the “rescue phase” (Matthews et al., 2014) in terms of diagnosing their school improvement priorities in the first year of their school improvement trajectory (i.e., safeguarding, behavior management, learning, and teaching). Multiple strands of school improvement activity were implemented concurrently, in a layered way (see subheadings below); in this article the focus is on 2 Strands). In their second year (Phase 3), where there have been elements of improvement (i.e., effective curriculum and leadership development) to secure stronger outcomes, schemes of reinforcement have been identified in most schools. Dealing with “looseness” in their school improvement trajectories varied, whilst the interplay of loose and tight coupling characterizing MATs model influence headteachers' school improvement priorities, as discussed below.

Strand 1: Securing the Conditions for Learning

As a legal requirement, headteachers prioritized safeguarding above all other concerns. Most of them made explicit mention of the need to address concerns regarding safeguarding and making decisions to secure improvements in student behavior. An effective use of networks has been an important support mechanism for new heads. The heads expressed their appreciation to their school governors, and to colleagues in the local authority or the MAT, for help in reviewing budgets in light of the additional expenditure. Whilst experienced heads indicated that they had existing contacts within their professional networks on whom

they could call to ask for support and advice, novice heads were usually reliant on support from the LA or their MAT to undertake reviews. In K's school, they have had a serious safeguarding incident where

a child has gone off school site without being flagged . . . then onsite and injured himself . . . and that's probably why the Trust moved quickly, we had another safeguarding review and then the Executive Head was put in as a layer of protection than support.

(Re-Head) As in earlier studies, the work is fast paced and, in case of emergencies, liaison with and support of the trust was readily available to help the new head tackle the emerged issue. Similarly, in Earley et al.'s work (2011, p. 38) collective sources of support and guidance from other heads, mentors, networks, and The School Improvement Partners (SIPs) were of great value, whilst the significance of networks is highlighted.

Reaching a state of compliance was seen as a sign of progress on the journey to improvement; thus, headteachers placed a strong emphasis on substantial audits to provide evidence of compliance with safeguarding policies. Once safeguarding was secure, the headteachers' decisions to balance between two priorities, improving student behavior and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching, has been closely associated. This is in line with findings from other case study research such as Day et al. (2016) and Matthews et al. (2014), both of which emphasized a similar "back to basics" approach focusing on core strands of improvement activity in order to improve the conditions for learning. In this study, the majority of heads, especially in secondary schools, made behavior the leading strand of activity before working to improve the quality of learning and teaching, because they felt that teachers were not provided with a proper foundation to demonstrate good teaching practice if there was constant disruption in the classroom. This sequencing contrasts with the recent survey findings of McAleavy et al. (2016), but echoes the experience of case study schools in the impact study (Day et al., 2009).

Headteachers also prioritized behavior as an opportunity to secure early evidence of improvement across the school which parallels to the experience of "low start" schools working on improvement within the impact study (Day et al., 2009, p. 42). Even where behavior was made the initial priority, there was clear recognition that addressing poor-quality teaching and poor curriculum provision needed to follow up quickly behind the action to improve student behavior, in order to prevent gains from one strand exacerbating the shortcomings in another core strand. In summary, the findings combine to indicate that the core strands of improvement were interdependent and needed to be addressed in parallel. The iterative nature of securing improvement in these strands required careful and regular monitoring designed to identify how cycles of improvement were developing (Day & Sammons, 2013, 2014; McAleavy et al., 2016). Experienced headteachers were able to call on a wider set of supporters in this area than novice headteachers, due to the greater breadth and depth of their leadership experience. Novice heads working as part of a MAT tended to rely more on support from within their trust to provide evidence in this area, although there were some exceptions to this. Where possible, it was seen as beneficial to utilize approaches from within the MAT in order to facilitate visits to observe the behavior policy and systems in action, and to facilitate initial CPD opportunities. If schools were part of a more developed MAT, they were more likely to be able to identify existing models and policies within their trust. Tight management practices help trust leaders support school improvement priorities for organizational change through controlled procedures to direct staff. In contrast, the headteacher of Pe school appreciated the advantages of decentralized structures in his/her MAT, with regard to supporting two other schools to develop their behavior policy, systems and models. This "looseness"—connected to leaders' autonomy to influence the content of their work as a sub-unit of a trust—influences the way they respond to school improvement priorities. This is subject to individual leaders' power and degree of autonomy to deviate from MAT accountability policies to fit their schools. In addition, staff welcomed strategies such as modeling lessons in the second year and shadowing leadership practices e.g., to observe Pe deputy Head in Raising Standards meetings. Nevertheless, some heads still looked outside their MAT, especially if they didn't have another school in similar circumstances within their trust. This is a good example of lateral coupling, which operates between professionals and units/subunits at the same level.

The perception of a suitably tried and tested approach also helped to secure buy-in from teachers working with the new behavior policy. However, Ry's headteacher expressed a disagreement about "one school . . . one system fits all" behavior policy implemented by their trust for consistency purposes, without taking into account the school's unique contextual characteristics:

The school was quite a unique school, in fact the area is quite unique. It's very, very challenging. It's got 1% deprivation in the country, has massive gang, drugs problems in the area. And [the trust] were trying to treat it like a middle-class school. Well unfortunately, you know, getting to know parents and putting staff instructions in that weren't really good enough for the school The pastoral team was cut massively, and I just felt that I couldn't work with the tools given so I decided to go back to local authority. (H, Ry's Head)

Some of the most challenged schools in terms of behavior, often the secondary schools, reported that by the end of the autumn term, if not by the first half term, behavior had improved markedly.

Many heads drew on a range of external as well as internal sources of data. Experienced heads in particular were likely to treat existing internal sources of evidence with a heavy degree of skepticism, especially where internal stakeholders had given a more positive perspective on the school than the headline data and Ofsted reports suggested was merited. This accords with findings from McAleavy and Riggall's survey (2016, p. 74). By contrast Draper and McMichael (2000) found that novice heads were likely to view the perspectives of existing SLT members as a source of invaluable insight into the context of the school and relationships to various stakeholders. A number of heads arranged for external reviews of various aspects of practice within their school. They often utilized contacts from their external professional networks to undertake such reviews and to supplement reviews undertaken by MAT or LA staff. These external voices were seen as important verification for the perspective of the new headteacher and thus became a powerful source of evidence for change, similar to the effects of "external diagnosticians" reported by Ross and Sibbald (2010). At the start of the year, these external voices would normally carry greater weight, especially where they came from a trusted source such as a former colleague from a previous school. Given the current accountability context, this might be perceived as a sensible strategy to execute such a management task to meet high-stake expectations. Weindling and Dimmock (2006) have indicated that the legacy effects of the previous leadership of a school can prevent new heads from approaching their work with a blank canvas, and the perspectives of external experts provided greater leverage for change within established cultures and practice.

Strand 2: Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning

Improving the quality of teaching and learning was a key strand of improvement activity for all case study schools in the study. Even in schools that asserted that behavior needed to be addressed before the quality of learning and teaching, many of the heads suggested that in reality the two core strands of school improvement were intertwined. Detailed analysis of student outcomes was a key source of diagnostic evidence, but there was some skepticism as to the value of internal assessment data and self-evaluation data, at least in part because these were schools with a pattern of low performance that had not been addressed. For this reason, external audits were also common in this area, from trusted peers from the headteacher's network of contacts and the LA/MAT. Recent Ofsted reports and curriculum and learning reviews were other key ways to gather evidence. Following an initial analysis of the evidence and discussion with teachers, SLT members, governors, and MAT leadership where appropriate, heads would set to work during their first year in post to address the specific areas of the curriculum, prioritizing those areas highlighted by issues that emerged from the data on student outcomes. Accountability demands shape the decisions of MAT leaders on the use of reviews data to improve practice. Reviews were often conducted by external assessors commissioned by the school heads, sometimes in collaboration with the LA (school improvement advisers) or with MAT CEOs. This contrasts Constantinides's (2022a, p. 177) study in a primary-led MAT in a non-judgmental support system was put in place, revealing the "MAT's approach to accountability involved a peer-review process in which [principals] were active agents in addressing the different capacities of schools in terms of the teaching quality, the curriculum and pupils' progress." However, in the current research, headteachers in their first year of appointment in organizations with increased accountability demands, such as in trust primary and secondary schools in challenging circumstances, seek external support, which would then inform their school improvement decision making.

Improving teaching and learning is a complex process that requires the interplay of internal and external forces such as policy, the agency of teachers and leaders, as well as the students engaged in the process. The head of Re's school admits that she has "built up a certain amount of trust in terms of my school

development plan . . . and they are happy to leave me alone. Support from others leaders within the trust certainly there is in my hub.” This would suggest loose coupling, allowing leaders to manage their school improvement journey at their own discretion, without a need to adjust to bureaucratic control (Pang, 2003). However, a higher level of accountability and control is more evident within low-performing secondary schools. K’s school head claims that “within the trust, I had to write weekly updates which I never had to do before, six week team reviews.” In a similar vein, almost all new heads in Earley et al’s research (2011, p. 23) made reference to issues concerning teaching and learning and the need to raise the quality of teaching in order to raise standards and meet the expectations of inspectors, given the high-stakes accountability culture in which they operated. Top-down decision making for educational improvement helps tightening a loosely coupled system whilst “tightly coupled organisations are easier to control and change from the top” (Hargreaves, 2011b in Hautala et al., 2018, p. 242).

In the current study the balance shifted more to curriculum development, in line with what school cohorts need, and less to teacher performance in the second year of school improvement in most schools. Moving into year two, there is a mixed picture where there is a case of redesigning curriculum led by the deputy head, extending the skills through curriculum across the subjects (e.g., Pe school), whereas new curriculum was introduced by the Trust following an Ofsted inspection (Ry’s head), while in another school an entire academy literacy curriculum has been introduced in year two, “borrowed heavily from . . . trust” (M school), whilst they have spent six months training staff in it. In this case it is likely that self-determination by school stakeholders and discretion is limited. This implies a shift to tight coupling that contradicts loose coupling characteristics, which “carry connotations of impermanence, dissolvability . . . all of which are potentially crucial properties of the ‘glue’ that holds organizations together” (Weick, 1992, p. 121). A balanced control mechanism and support were executed by the trust “certainly until OFSTED . . . We were not in a position to make decisions and I was a new headteacher, so probably a little bit risky,” as the new head of P school stated. A vertical communication and centralization of curriculum development has been perceived by some leaders as an effective way to enhance consistency, but these leaders challenged the dependence on other trust schools’ practices, which they might not share similar characteristics. Similarly to Constantinides’s (2021, p. 8) research, “autonomy initiatives loosely defined that schools could probably develop and decide on their own approach to curriculum and pedagogy” even in cases where performance was poor. This has resulted the directive role of MAT in curriculum management. Although there has been evidence in the literature which suggests a more distributed nature of instructional leadership (IL) in schools, a key feature of IL enactment as part of this strand in most schools, demonstrates the prevailing hierarchical role of the senior trust leaders. Nevertheless, this seems to confirm the current presence of an old critique of the “solo” IL role of principals in managing teaching and learning.

Trust-wide development with teaching and learning supporting individual schools’ teaching and learning has been a mechanism to develop a more cohesive model of school improvement as a trust. Although current policy in England encourages a more autonomous school-led system, it indirectly suggests a preference for a standardized approach via “good practice,” and this might create a drive to a concept recognized in organizational theory as “conformity” (Scott, 2013) In the case of viewing trusts as relatively homogenous and hierarchical, there is an implying fear of isomorphism, homogenization and loss of identity of individual schools (Glatter 2022). In Pe school, an entire bespoke curriculum has been introduced in year one, and it was praised by Ofsted. A senior leader of Pe school (head in year 1 of school improvement and trust leader–director of education in year 2 phase 3), explains that they “refined it this year and the other schools across the trust has adopted it . . . ” As shown on the school’s website, in this school they work alongside the community, whilst at trust level, the director of education has worked collaboratively with other headteachers and curriculum leaders. Similarly to Me’s school head argument about “developing that one trust approach,” Ph’s school head argued that

<EXT>for standardisation purposes perhaps, as the MAT matures you become more consistent and you exert more control centrally because it’s easier to generate data and make generalisations . . . If you’ve got all your schools doing different things you cannot make generalisations. . . MATS that want to generalise about their schools to the Board necessarily have to exert more control [This is] my hypothesis and I struggle with that. Smaller Trusts with limited resources need more consistency, but I need to think as a Head, is that a model I can operate within?’ </EXT>

As a result of leaders' limited autonomy, standardization of operational and controlled procedures, hierarchy, and regular monitoring of teaching and learning processes, evidence of tightly coupling is prominent. Mansell (2016: 20) argues that a uniformity of education experience across schools and a centralized control at trust level is illustrated in large academy chains. Although the researched schools in multi-academy trusts are not identical, the level of autonomy in teaching and learning approaches and curriculum is in line to DfE's White Paper (2020), which suggests consistency across schools. This might be due to the nature of top-down accountability at system level, which affects the exercise of autonomy. Ry's Head claimed that the trust:

We were putting a blanket curriculum in which again . . . it was set for 10 schools all with different catchment areas. So, you'd got similar – well not . . . there wasn't a school like ours, as deprived, but you'd got some with deprivation, but you'd got "outstanding" schools who didn't need a set curriculum. We were told we could only spend it one way . . .

Greany and Higham (2018) argue that the English system offers "coercive autonomy," in which schools are given discretion in operational powers whilst there is close monitoring from the trust. Some of the researched case study schools, despite the fact that they were "Requires Improvement or Inadequate" prior to the start of the new head, were held up as models of development for curriculum and/or assessment to other schools in their MAT. One experienced primary head had worked hard on developing a number of curriculum areas, including the development of greater oracy skills in the development of writing in order to boost writing outcomes in the older year groups. The new CEO of the MAT within which the school operates was very eager to roll a number of these initiatives out across each of the schools in their trust.

The CEO said "That's great that you've done that" . . . and he said because whatever you do in your school we want across the trust . . . Which is lovely, because it obviously shows that [the CEO] rates the impact that we've had on the things that we've put in place in this school. (Experienced primary headteacher)

The headteacher nevertheless went on to express some concern that the heads of other schools in their MAT might not be so eager to take on board these initiatives without prior consultation. Members of SLT in the school expressed their appreciation that their new but nonetheless experienced head was able to shield them somewhat from the enthusiasm and drive of the CEO so that they could focus on what they as leaders had agreed were the priorities for the school.

A consistent approach to teaching and marking was adopted by some schools as an approach to improve the quality of teaching focused on a set of core priorities shared by schools right across the MAT. An experienced secondary headteacher said:

If you go around all the schools in the Trust you'll see the same posters on the walls with the same messages in terms of, this is how we mark; this is how we ask questions.

Some schools were prepared to live with the frustration of adopting decisions made at the trust level, which suggested the same practices during the first year on their road to improvement in order to secure consistency, with a view to transitioning to a more nuanced approach to development of teaching in the second year of the new headship, and beyond. The head of Re school claims that the trust is supporting them "Certainly up until OFSTED . . . we were not in a position to make decisions to be made and I was a new headteacher so probably a little bit risky." The trust that Re school operates has organized Trust Curriculum days in December (year 2), where heads and subject leads come together in a forum to discuss curriculum development:

We are all quite individual schools. We all have quite individual curriculum with different context the hub we are working. The rest of the schools apart from 1 are in the middle class. Is in deprivation, high Pupil Premium. Their curriculum has to be different to us (Re Head)

Different approaches to coupling were found in different schools under different MATs. Although loose coupling is highlighted in Pe and Re's schools, Re's school head recognized the trust's control mechanism role and tight coupling at times when "there are times, particularly where things around. . .safeguarding, performance management audit" are problematic." As a result of the presence of bureaucratic control features which connect schools to the trust goals, trust leaders are bound to influence their school improvement priorities within a tightly coupled system, whereas there is some evidence of variation in

practices. Constantinides's (2022a) study suggests that approaches used by the trust schools were monitored by the leadership team of the MAT.

Another significant feature of tight coupling is adopting policies and processes that were common across all schools in their MATs, and this was regarded by some school leaders as a strategy to improve the quality of teaching. This accords with findings from Constantinides's (2022b) and Greany's (2020) research in multigroup/MATs, which suggest centralization in overseeing standards and monitoring progress whilst little control is given to schools. However, leadership trust can impact the scale of couplings. In the case of K school, a tendency to a loose coupling in the continuum gave more autonomy to the subunit. K's school head admits that they have changed the way they trained staff and

took away judgemental approach to teaching ... It was far more collegial ... we have a higher level of trust now and internal accountability, we trust one another ... It was a totally different model in year 2 which I think changed the atmosphere and made it less fearful.

Agency-centered coupling is perceived to contribute to teachers' agency for organizational change and collaboration (Hokka and Vahasantanen, 2014, *in* Hautala et al., 2018, p. 243).

Tighter management practices are evidenced in the case of underperformance, where intervention schemes are brought in the trust schools whilst "members of Trust will join Raising Standards meetings at the end of assessment cycle for predominantly year 6 and recommendations will be made in terms of ... additional support, maybe specific intervention, and that's where their involvement is coming," as Pe's head says. In a similar vein, Re's school head referred to an adviser's role from the trust who facilitates school improvement in the hub schools, supporting the head with the review and providing resources whilst additional learning walks were taken place within the trust. This is in line with Greany and McGinity's research (2021, p. 320), which explored approaches to school improvement in MATs, suggesting investment in people and capacity through MAT-wide professional development programs as a way of building staff commitment to a shared culture. In M's school, they have made cost-effective decisions by taking advantage of specific areas of strength used as a mechanism of support to keep the talent within their organization and support retention.

We've got a particularly strong SEND lead in one of our primaries that we've released two days a week to do some cross-trust work, and that's helping us ... Because it costs you a fortune to buy in from outside and then we created a couple of roles which we recruited into the trust. (M school Head)

Alongside the core strand of CPD, many of the schools had established programmes of support for teachers who, via on-going lesson observations, were observed to be inconsistent in their teaching and peer-to-peer learning. These findings align with the literature which contends that human resource mobilization can provide job-embedded pedagogical support and promote learning while staff are developing instructional leadership expertise (Kaparou & Bush, 2016; Greany & McGinity, 2021). In Phase 3 of this research, the leaders of Pe school highlighted the importance of collaboration in the development approaches of the Trust through involving school leaders in the Trust Improvement Network for the development of Teaching and Learning. The agendas (eg, reading, wider curriculum, ethos and inclusion) are set in discussion with the Trust director of education and network members offer support over individual school's improvement plans whilst developmental peer- observations take place (Pedagogical champions across the Trust). All the case study headteachers highlighted the importance of the existence of a strong professional network as a source of advice and support for their work to secure school improvement, something that accords with longstanding studies of school leadership. The emergence of network leadership has been a significant feature in the current educational landscape (Harris et al., 2021). Experienced heads tended to have a wider set of colleagues to whom they could turn for advice and support during this important first year of headship in a new school, and their networks included those with a wider range of school leadership experience (Moolenaar & Slegers, 2015). Networked school leaders effectively develop and support their networks within and beyond their schools through using learning networks (Brown, 2020).

Leadership and Power Dynamics in Decision Making in Schools within MATs

Leadership is a significant feature for school improvement in tightly and loosely coupled systems. During the interviews there was an emphasis on the need to secure an effective, united senior leadership team during their first year in post whilst in the second year (phase 3) the focus was on middle leadership development. Evidence of tight coupling was observed at a transition stage of the school improvement trajectory, where power resides with senior leaders. Ingersoll (1993, p. 97) claims that ‘data on the distribution of decision-making power in schools suggest that school administrators do indeed have a number of key levers with which to control teachers.’ A number of experienced heads, especially those working in the case study secondary schools, were very open about initially adopting a top-down, directive approach to leadership in terms of setting up a leadership team, establishing the vision and expectations, and in the diagnosis of school improvement priorities. This was confirmed through interviews with members of SLTs who worked with experienced heads. They indicated that the early priorities of school improvement planning were usually established by the new head, aligned with the Trust’s priorities. They saw their role as implementing and embedding the plans to tackle these early priorities such as improving behavior and the quality of learning and teaching. As argued by Pruvot and Estermann (2018, in *Cardona-Ramirez & Hernandez-Calderon, 2024: 115*), “the combination of decentralized power and centralized rules leads to internal . . . pressures with the capacity to strengthen autonomy without losing full control.” M’s school head said that the Trust’s mission is:

very heavily embedded but that’s because I was probably part of the whole trust strategy and I’ve pulled it in. Not all of the principals across the trust were quite as bought in. And a couple of the schools are lagging behind in doing that which is why we’ve got the whole trust day . . . So there’s a common thread now running right through the trust that we’re all working to.

Interestingly, this head’s instrumental role in working at the strategic level of the Trust make him see his role as ‘a co-creator in the system.

However, the concentration of power and formality and the increased need to respond to strategic demand for organizational improvement is associated with strong coupling. The example below shows that the power dynamics within a MAT influence a new-in-post headteacher’s school improvement priorities to ensure the development of tightly coupled structures for organizational effectiveness at an early stage of the school improvement trajectory. K’s school head explained that the Trust seconded the deputy in his school whilst the leadership team was not united. “When you’ve got very inexperienced teachers and inexperienced leaders. . . then you can get the perfect storm The expectations were so low, . . . anarchy on the ground.” It is recognized as a common practice to see senior and middle leaders leading committees with their Trusts (e.g., in Pe school Trust: Assistant Heads involved in Region committee; Deputy heads involved in Curriculum; Inclusion Committee) and this suggests a self-improving peer-to-peer support mechanism within MATs. When “power continues to be concentrated; this is a factor causing tension among the . . . groups” (*Cardona-Ramirez & Hernandez-Calderon, 2024, p. 113*) This tends to be in agreement with Xia et al. (2020), p. 401) argument that school districts in the United States play a significant role in the decision making process whilst “consulting with schools on many decisions.”

Experienced heads exemplified a top-down approach to leadership and decision-making through controlling the school improvement strategies for change:

Whatever the school was doing was irrelevant anyway, because I was going to strip it right back. I was adamant about that. People might have a problem with this, but my kind of view was whatever they are currently doing was wrong. I don’t care what anyone else says, it does not work, because these children are being systematically failed. (Experienced secondary headteacher)

Power dynamics of experienced heads have influenced leadership enactment in terms of authority and setting controlled monitoring systems and structures with the aim of ensuring uniformity and sequential school improvement performance objectives.

Given the vision-orientated nature of leadership, a balance between solo and top-down management practices with collaborative leadership to foster a sense of community, has been the case when transitioning to the second year of school improvement journeys. A more consensual approach would be the aim from the second year of headship and beyond, as explained by an experienced head, after the initial

improvements have been secured. By contrast, novice heads tended to be more consultative in their school improvement planning from the outset; this might be explained as a result of an increased pressure for accountability. A novice head describes below her consultative approach to school improvement planning:

It's not just me. There's a team of people at senior leadership level and middle leadership level. The way that we do a school improvement plan is that we will sit as a group and decide on our priorities. So there's input from all the senior leaders. And we all draft [sections] . . . And then middle leaders will use the same Improvement plan as ours, but redraft it so that they are able to make sure that the strands of priority come through. (Novice secondary headteacher)

Novice headteachers usually made these discoveries at a later stage during the first year of headship. For instance, Re's school Head said that "now it is becoming more of coaching leadership rather than a top-down, authoritative style." M's Head admits that they draw on Trust resources and coaching new heads within and outside the Trust is a way for sustainable school improvement through building senior leaders' capacity across the organization:

I think we've got a flatter structure now, SLT-wise . . . Now that the others are kind of trained and we're all in one circle, to be honest, it's a more flatter structure than it was really. Trust Board don't sit out there anymore. Trust Board sit down here now. So, we've got a much closer working relationship with the Trust Board. (Head of M school)

In two of the smaller case study primary schools, both led by novice headteachers, the original intention was to establish a flat structure for a new SLT. In each case this was considered at the time to be the best fit for supporting responsibilities associated with the newly developed school improvement plan.

In response to the interview question about the role of MAT in supporting schools, the majority of headteachers argued that, to some extent, they have retained their decision-making authority in their role as unit leaders within the Trust. Similarly to Constantinides research (2022a), various decisions are made through contextualized interpretation to MAT accountability policies. Whilst school leaders have taken leadership responsibilities within their Trusts, they feel part of the Trust and have an input in the strategic development of the whole Trust. For instance, Re's school headteacher said:

They have started to recognise that heads have expertise too and to use them to improve the Trust. I set up developing Standards Meetings across the schools, . . . how to standardise work across the hub. Privileged position to see what school improvement happens in other schools. Heads and leaders get together to discuss how to further develop our curriculum and we come up with a statement for the Trust. . . I am now also in the Executive Leaders group within the Trust which is mostly Executive Heads which I am not, but because I lead training across the Trust they asked me to be part of this. It's very much from a hands on headteacher of a village school to starting having more of a strategic overview of how different schools can get support and work together to improve outcomes for children. . . . So last year and this year it was more about how I balance the needs of the Trust with the needs of the school. Yes, we are providing that support to other without lessening our positioning. [in the Trust]

Evidence from this particular Trust website shows that the Trust recognizes individual school's identities whilst Re's Head admits that this model suits how she wants it to be and she appreciated the usefulness of Trust support, given special measures schools' vulnerable position. Examining school leadership practices as coupling mechanisms which form power relationships, we could argue that Re's case is more closely to loose coupling of the power relationship continuum given that the head can be distinctive from the Trust in some operational school decision making processes.

In another school (Pe) the leadership team feels supported by the Trust Director of Education and Executive Heads in the decision-making process in terms of school improvement priorities whilst school heads are receiving support via

mentor sessions with the Trust CEO [informing them about] research pedagogy, . . . what needs to be put in place [e.g., Learning Walks, group work opportunities; feeds in to monitoring recent timetable]; how you are gonna do it [coaching element is there on day-to-day basis; Inclusion hub]. There are so many layers of support, it's unbelievable. (Pe school's Head)

However, the head and deputy head of Pe school questioned the development of a shared vision with a Trust due to the CEO's unclear vision which made relationships fluid between the Trust and schools. In Pe's case,

the school's vision initially was separate from the Trust and there was evident of a shift from directive, paternalistic to transparent approaches of decision making. Whilst "[moving to the second year of school improvement] the school vision feeds in the Trust vision; we have done a lot of work on that towards the end of last year." It is worth noting that since a senior school leader (Pe's Head in Year 1) moved to a senior leadership position within the Trust in year 2 (Director of Education of the Trust), dynamics have changed whilst a common thread was developed, as Pe school Head states. Members of the Trust do line management reviews and they suggest recommendations whilst reviews are made in conjunction with the school. Thus "it is very much in collaboration . . . It's not control. It doesn't feel like that at all. It's a unit. It's a family of schools altogether. . . . The Trust is part of us, that's what it is. Because we have leaders who are not school based but in the Trust who feed in to support" (Pe school head). Decision making for the Director of Education of the Trust comes through discussions with school heads, collegiality and influence. One of the key transformational leadership arguments of having leaders influence, inspire and raise motivation of other school leaders and teachers is exemplified in these cases. By setting out a compelling vision for the MAT performance, MAT leaders influence followers (leaders of sub-units/schools) to achieve a common goal. However, the level of participative and democratic nature of micro-level leaders in decision making might be refuted.

The coexistence of loose and tight coupling in Trust schools contributes to the narrative of simultaneous coupling. This has occurred as a result of a combination of loose properties focused on autonomy and decentralized structures as well as tight properties focused on controlled shared values and practices (Meyer, 2002; Pang, 2003). The way academy leaders respond to high-stakes accountability policies varies. Some school leaders said that certain ties were weakened in the Trust system whilst they had experienced top-down management to ensure tightly coupled structures with the aim of enhancing consistency.

Contrary to a potential expectation in a compliance-oriented system which would suggest a command and control management approach, relationships between the Trust and schools have shifted because "this role is very much more about influencing others rather than my command and control and . . . because we now have Education Committee meetings that give a good framework of having these conversations and make decision" as claimed by the Director of Education of the Trust that Pe school operates. In this case, decision-making is consultative as the views of school leaders are taken into account before decision is taken. The Trust Director's of Education approach to decision making has characteristics of the transparent approach in which leaders involve headteachers in decision-making, "leading to defined and collectively owned principles" (Greany & McGinity, 2021, p. 321).

In contrast, power vested in a MAT senior management creates challenges and restricts decentralized decision making and creates tightly coupling, jeopardizing school leaders' contribution to school improvement strategies. The head of Ry's school -who has gone back to a Local Authority school at the time when interviews were taken place in Phase 3- did not welcome the power that her Trust was exerting in her school as this restricts heads' power and autonomy in decision making:

What they were trying to do was implement set structures to X number of Headteachers when really – and I said this to them – you don't need somebody like me, you need a Head of School if that's the way you're going. You know, put in a – because they also put an Executive Principal above. And that, for me, you know is . . . well you've got another boss, ultimately, making decisions for you. Well I can't do the best I can when somebody's taking decisions out of my hands. So, you know, I chose to go lead my own school again.

With regard to decision making, it seems that leaders in this MAT adopt a directive approach to decision making, suggesting they are "the design authority" (Greany & McGinity, 2021, p. 321) Evidence of more directed and authoritative leadership was executed within the Trust that Ry school operates, whilst a battle of power at organizational level is apparent. Ry's view suggests that MAT leaders are exercising control over behavior and performance management and this may lead to tightly coupled relationships between Ry's school and the MAT. Leaders' view of an expectation of a MAT organization to exert influence upon the Trust strategic direction, contrasts the evidence of limited discretion that enables school leaders to actively engage in decision making of operational activities of the MAT's sub-units (schools). As Ry head says, "no matter what a head's view is, the Trust would implement changes and policies regardless." This set of dynamics suggests tension between leaders at Trust and school levels whilst tight top-down management structures undermine the agency of leaders at micro level. In the discussed case, it seems that there was no

flexibility in devising a strategy for school improvement whilst the extent of autonomy levels in management operations, implementation and strategic direction at school level was very restricted.

It was very much; we're doing this this way. There was an ex-HMI who worked for the Trust and this Ofsted inspector who I know quite well, and they both spoke to the CEO their concerns, saying that if these policies were implemented staff would leave and Heads would leave, and the CEO, the Deputy CEO, said, "Well let them leave." . . . you just don't get outstanding teachers walking through the door. Those people don't want to work with children with severe difficult behaviour. And even though I sorted the behaviour, there are still days where there are, you know, lots of challenges. Because you don't know what's happening on the estate. . . . And they'd found a gun on the grass opposite the school! . . . But I just think, you know . . . if the Multi Academy Trust is going to take a school like that then they've got to understand the school and they don't. You know, it's – those kids deserve the best chance in life and what they're doing isn't giving them the best chance in life. (Ry school Head)

Results from this study show a varying looseness of ownership and identity when it comes to individual schools' coupling (subunit) with the centralization of instructions and resources whilst retaining a certain degree of independence. This calls attention to the relationship between the Trust governance and management model and the school stakeholders' agency at micro (school) and meso (Trust) levels. In Culpin and Male's (2022, p. 293) paper MATs are equated to the concept of loosely-coupled organizations, formed of numerous constituent academies and held together much more loosely than a hierarchical structure would tolerate.' The concept of coupling has been a controversial area in the educational change discourse. "[T] hose in favor of systemic change, have viewed tightening the loosely coupled education system as a mechanism for educational improvement [in the US]" (Shen et al., 2017, p. 660). Bearing in mind the multi-layered policy and management structures for systemic change, it would be sensible to be in agreement with Hautala et al. (2018, p. 251) argument that "it is not relevant to consider educational organizations as either loosely or tightly coupled . . . but as having simultaneous loose and tight configurations."

Conclusion

In response to a radical school change and improvement and system-wide policy on academization, this article seeks to understand new-in-post leaders' priorities of the improvement trajectory. The study demonstrates evidence of layering of leadership actions (Day et al., 2016) and interplay within and between these strands of improvement activity, with new-in-posts leaders of schools in challenging contexts working in parallel on the two strands of activity: conditions for learning and quality of teaching and learning, which are the focus of this article. Given that a MAT/trust itself is accountable for the performance of each school in the group, with the executive head overseeing school's performance, the findings highlight how leadership and power dynamics between schools and trust leaders can affect decision making and impact key strands of school improvement activities, as discussed in the article. There is a tendency for a close monitoring of academy schools' improvement, standardization of practices, and a prioritization of accountability policies, and this is not in accordance with the philosophy of loose coupling. Examples from the trust schools in this research suggest that managing relationships with trusts about school improvement can require complex decision-making regarding standardization of pedagogical activities, whilst it restricts the level of autonomy in strategic planning and execution to meet centralized MAT standards. The emerging complexity of autonomy in school leadership can cause tension between hierarchical and more distributed models of leadership, especially when exercising autonomy for decision making in turnaround schools. Similarly to Xia et al.'s study (2020, p. 425), "there is no one single power relationship across all decision areas." It is not surprising to observe a mix of tight and loose coupling in organizations such as MATs, which are composed of schools in challenging contexts. As Hautala et al. (2018, p. 252) argue, "balancing loose and tight aspects through simultaneous loose and tight coupling is considered as a characteristic of effective [...] educational organizations." However, in multi-school organizations such as trust schools, there are features of new public management (e.g., mission driven governance, results oriented), which are driven by schools themselves in the light of decentralization and the emergence of a "self-improving school system." MATs exert influence upon the strategic direction of trust schools; whilst it has been a mixed

picture about enacting collective and consultative approaches or top-down decision-making approaches, the latter was mainly evident in secondary case study schools' diagnosis of school improvement priorities. After initial improvements have been secured, trust stakeholders would aim for more consensual approaches in decision making, whilst acting as organizational levers to coordinate school improvement actions. Theories of instructional, transformational, system, and network leadership have resonated with trust school leaders, and they have adapted to the increased level of complexity in serving schools in challenging contexts. Whilst it has been evident that many schools adopt standardized approaches to curriculum and assessment to secure consistency and enhance cost-effective decisions as a result of more hierarchically controlled decision making at the trust level, "coercive autonomy" is given to schools (Greany and Higham, 2018). Similar to Constantinides's (2022b) and Greany's (2020) research in multigroup/MATs, the findings suggest schools' limited control in overseeing standards and monitoring progress. As rightly argued by Culpin and Male (2022, p. 298), "in complex systems, under accountability pressures, the temptation, however, may be to impose that narrative, but not always with positive results," bearing in mind the effect of context and the student community that schools in challenging contexts serve. This research has further reinforced the importance of contextual factors affecting new-in-post principals' leadership practices.

Despite its small scale, the findings reported in this article are important nonetheless, and can contribute to the limited knowledge base of trust stakeholders' dynamics for the improvement of schools in challenging contexts within Multi-Academy Trusts (e.g., Constantinides, 2022a; Male, 2022). This research enables greater insight into the complexities of managing change at an early stage of headship. Looking earlier works (Earley & Weindling, 2004; Weindling & Dimmock, 2006) key challenges –improving the public image of the school, low staff morale, dealing with ineffective staff and raising teaching quality–remain similar over the years, despite the changes in government policies. Pupils' behavior and managing teaching and learning became more challenging in recent years and these issues relate to the context that new-in-post leaders have found themselves, notably in challenging contexts where the need for rapid improvement is required. Although current policy in England encourages a more autonomous school-led system, it indirectly suggests a preference for a standardized approach via "good practice" and this might create a drive to a concept recognized in organizational theory as "conformity" (Scott, 2013). Despite recognizing the limitations of the depth and breadth of empirical evidence of this study, it is sensible to argue that this article might be generalized to other settings sharing similar characteristics. A number of implications for practice have been drawn out, and they are relevant to those involved in the training and preparation of school leaders, as well as to policy makers and those researching school leadership and school improvement.

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