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Strategic narrative in multi-academy trusts in England: principal drivers for expansion

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Abstract

Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) are now a common feature of the English educational landscape. yet numerous high-profile failures indicate that they present substantial challenges in terms of leadership and governance. One of areas that most exercises school leaders and boards is the setting of strategic direction for the MAT. This includes elements such as its expansion. This paper draws on 30 interviews with school leaders and trustees from 6 MATs and 10 interviews with National Leaders of Governance in looking to respond to the research question: What are the principal drivers for strategic expansion in MATs? The paper begins by contextualising the research in light of recent policy, then moves to consider why theory on strategy as narrative was chosen in preference to other strategic approaches, and how it was employed to analyse data. The paper concludes that within this sample there are a number of drivers for MAT expansion and that these fall under six principal categories: Opportunities, values, pressures, feelings, risks and resources. It also concludes that resources and business viability play a substantial part in decisions to expand, and that strategy appears to be an iterative learning process. As such it contributes to theory on the governance of multi-level organisations and to practice in terms of the Department for Education focus on MAT growth

Introduction

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

As part of this trend, education systems and how they are governed, have undergone rapid and unprecedented levels of change (Baxter, 2016). This is particularly true of England which now possesses a system largely driven by performance measures and evaluation linked to attainment of government mandated targets. The target driven culture infuses many countries within the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), influenced by quantitative international result comparisons such as the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) report. Successive English governments have wholeheartedly embraced the discourse of education as an economic driver, evidenced by the large amount of market-based reforms that have been undertaken by governments since 1988 (Ozga, 2009). These reforms increased under the Coalition Administration which came to power in 2010 giving rise to unprecedented and untested change in education in England. They are reflected as the erosion of the power of Local Education Authorities (LA) power (Lawn, 2013), increasing curricular and financial freedoms for schools in the shape of free schools and academies (Higham & Hopkins, 2007) and raising the bar in inspection and regulation of schools (Baxter, 2016).

Many schools formerly overseen by Local Education Authorities (LAs) have converted or been mandated to convert to semi-autonomous state schools in the form of Academies. Operational drivers, such as the need to combine in order to cost effectively buy in services once provided by Las, along with research that implies that schools grouping together contribute positively to student progress, Muijs et al, 2009), have resulted in Academy Chains, Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) and other less formal forms of collaboration such as federations. Collaborations have for some time now been felt across many public services, made popular by initiatives from New Public Management approaches and market ideologies that suggest that collaboration enhances organisational performance, despite a range of evidence which suggests that this is not always the case (see for example: Huxham &

Vangen, 2013). As a result, boards once responsible for governing and oversight of a single school are now situated in tiered and hierarchical multi-level governance structures.

MATs began to emerge in 2004 and were actively promoted first by Gordon Brown's government in 2007, and then more radically and directly by the Coalition Government in 2010. The promotion of this type of arrangement has appeared in successive government policies since then despite the lack of evidence in terms of the extent to which they are successful in closing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students (Francis, 2017). MATs are formed from academy schools – schools free from financial and curricular control by Education Authorities. They may be small, numbering 3-5 schools or far larger, encompassing over 50 schools.

Table one: Size of MATs (Source National Governance Association 2018: www.nga.org.uk)

The government White Paper, Educational Excellence Everywhere, made clear that by 2020 all schools would become academies (page 55). In response to widespread protest, the government subsequently reversed the decision to convert the plans into legislation, with the Education Secretary telling Parliament that although it remained the government's ambition that, 'all schools should benefit from the freedom and autonomy that academy status brings', ministers did not need wider legislation to make progress on an 'ambitious' education agenda, (Whittaker, 2016). However, there is little doubt that, in practice, they have not deviated from their vision and the number of schools joining MATs continues to rise. There were over 20,100 state funded schools in England on 01 November 2017. Of these 6,100 were academies of which 1,668 were standalone academies and 4,432 were part of MATs. Compared to 2016 there has been a decrease in the number of state-funded schools (from 21,500) and an increase in the number of academies that were both standalone (from 1,618) and those in MATS (DfE, 2018). One of the reasons for the exponential level of growth in MAT numbers is due to the expectation by the Department for Education that successful schools will take on those that are failing. However, this has not in some cases proven to be the panacea that the government intended, and there are plentiful cases of schools which have failed to thrive within MATS (Parliament, 2017). The growth of MATs has been checked by a considerable amount of opposition to the ideological basis for the policy: The undermining of LA powers and finance under the premise of austerity has not (in spite of media coverage to the contrary), decimated all authorities and many schools continue to flourish under their guidance (Edmond & Pettitt, 2016) The opposition to expansion of the scheme has been the subject of a number of powerful papers and depositions by members of the educational community who criticise it for a number of reasons: a lack of democratic accountability (Gann, 2016) , a belief that it will lead to a for profit system (Editorial, 2016), and a fundamentally centralized system which erodes the very notion of a democratic effective education system for all, and in which the degree of uniformity will result in the reproduction of the existing system rather than looking to transform it (Manzone, 2016).

Types of MAT in relation to number of schools in England

As the literature on multi-level governance in both the public and not-for-profit sector reveals (Foss, Husted, & Michailova, 2010; Cornforth, 2012), providing strategic direction for several organisations, which may also be widely geographically dispersed, creates a number of challenges for those responsible for setting the strategic direction of the organisation –the governing boards and senior leadership teams. Previous research into public sector organisations has revealed two key challenges for boards governing multi-level organisations: how to gain local/community information for strategy making, and how to source and communicate this information within and between levels of governance (Foss et al., 2010).

Research indicates that remaining in touch with school communities is a key challenge for multi-academy trusts (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014), particularly when they are spread over several

geographical areas, many of which are culturally and socio economically diverse. Recent evidence that MATs are not able to do this has given rise to profound concerns raised by the Education Select Committee (Parliament, 2017).

Nested governance arrangements are hierarchical and as Bradshaw and Toubiana, writing on the third sector, argue, are 'tension-filled and oscillating, or in need of balancing and crafting as opposed to managing.*'* (2014, p.232). The challenge for MAT boards and senior leaders at the apex of the organisation is in understanding the needs of diverse and dispersed school communities and considering them in decision making processes (Cornforth, 2012)

Research from the education sector into MAT governance is still in its infancy, by drawing on data from interviews with key stakeholders in MAT strategy making as well as national leaders of governance, and using a theoretical framework based on the idea of viewing strategy as narrative practice, this paper offers an original and important contribution to the literature on the governance of multi-level organisations. It does so by investigating the following research questions:

- **What are the principal drivers for strategic expansion in MATS?**
- **How do strategic discourses of trustees reflect these drivers?**

MATs can vary in size and geographical spread, but whatever their size and scope, they possess hierarchical structures of governance that imply substantial challenge, not only for the overarching board of trustees, but equally in relation to the governing boards that sit under them. As figure 1 indicates, the board of trustees is supplemented by several governing committees overseeing finance, standards and resources. In very large MATs that are geographically dispersed there are further levels of governance including Cluster Committees and a Cluster CEO (or head teacher). These committees are responsible for schools located in geographical proximity to one another.

When MATS take over new schools, either of their own volition or at the behest of the Regional Schools Commissioner or Department of Education, they delegate certain powers to academy boards. The extent of those powers very much appears to depend on whether schools are perceived as weak (in terms of their last inspection by the school standards regulator –Ofsted), or relatively strong. In the case of weak schools, Academy Boards have few decision-making powers and are often subject to strict monitoring by central trust boards. In the case of stronger schools, their boards are most likely to have greater powers, delegated by the board of trustees, which will vary in their scope and range depending on the particular board. These arrangements are set out in a 'formal scheme of delegation which schools are mandated by the Department of Education to display on their website' (Baxter, 2018, p.4).

Figure 1 adapted from Baxter 2018.

The paper begins with a note on terminology, it continues by explaining our theoretical framework, the narrative approach and why it is the focus of this paper. From there it moves to expand upon the sample and data analysis, before moving to the findings and discussion in relation to the research questions and emergent themes. It concludes with a discussion of findings, the contribution the study makes to knowledge on collaborative governance, and the implications for further research in this area.

Terminology – a note.

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

(TB) who sit at the top of the hierarchy of governance in MATs and academy board members (AB), those that are on boards at academy level. The authors acknowledge that apart from trustees at the apex of these organisations, there is a great deal of variation in the duties and responsibilities of board members (Baxter, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Collaborative governance

The governance of collaborations in the public sector sits within the broader concept of collaborative governance, as Vangen and Cornforth (2015, p.1239), outline,

> Collaborative governance draws primarily on literature describing new patterns of government and governing. Organisations are brought together to govern society, contribute to public value, implement public policy or manage public programmes or assets in a collaboration arrangement.

The emergence of collaborations within the public sector is attributable to social, political and economic factors that have given rise to a paradoxical interweaving of market principles and democratic ideals which have characterised governance and governing since the demise of the post war consensus in the mid-1970s. Today's education board members function as 'semi-independent or parastatal actors which permit government to 'tackle a wide range of social issues without involvement in the minutiae of day to day political actions' (Flinders, 2008, p, 3.). They are also a result of the shift from hierarchical bureaucratic forms of governing to networked forms of governance which have manifested by a shift in power 'away from traditional government institutions, upwards to transitional bodies, and downwards to regions and sub-regions' (Newman, 2001, p.11).

This paper views MATs as collaborative organisations as defined by Bardach (1998) who builds on Moore (1995) and Imperial (2005), to define collaboration as:

> Any joint activity, between two or more organisations, intended to create public value by working together as well as separately. This interactive process involves autonomous group of rational actors who use shared rules, norms, or organisational structures to act or make collective decisions (Imperial, 2005, page.286).

Collaborative advantage, collaborative inertia

Research into organisational collaborations such as MATs identify two main issues which exist even when all parties are keen for the collaboration to work well. Huxham and Vangen describe these as collaborative advantage and collaborative inertia, 'capturing a fundamental and practical tension between what is aimed for in collaboration and the challenges of achieving this in practice.' (Huxham & Vangen, 2013, p.10). In the case of schools, there is little doubt that there are advantages, both pedagogical and managerial, to be gained by collaboration, but there is also the risk that the collaboration will end in inertia, causing the failure of the organisation and the future of schools within it. A rising tide of examples of MAT failures reflect this (see Adams & Barr, 2018). The sheer number of instances in which MATs have failed to improve schools within their organisations or have experienced financial difficulties illustrate that these collaborations are no easier in the education sector than they are elsewhere (HCEC, 2014-15). Widmer and Houchin (1999, p.29) point out that federated governance arrangements often experience a tension between the need for greater efficiency and centralization and the need for 'representation of local interests'. Previous research carried out by the authors of this study and others indicates that strong relationships with communities also yields considerable benefits in terms of resource (Baxter , 2016; Francis, 2017), and that links to local

employers and community organisations can make an enormous contribution to raising aspirations in these areas. Schools in these communities very often function in ways that work positively to draw individuals out of poverty, martialling community spirit and resources to combat social isolation and marginalisation (Thomson, 2015). The rate of expansion of MATs has been highlighted as key concerns for the future development of the academies programme. The Education Committee 2017 report into Multi- Academy Trusts questioned the speed at which MATs had expanded and over too large geographical regions and argued that, 'Schools that operate near one another are best able to share resources and expertise and subsequently can most successfully take advantage of being part of a MAT. (Paragraph, 54).'

The DfE propose to introduce a MAT 'growth check' in order to evaluate why and how effectively MAT growth is operating. However, at present there are also grave concerns as to how and why MATs grow, considering the wide variations in the performance of trusts (ibid, p, 32).

A key element in understanding how organisations position themselves strategically is the identification of the drivers behind their strategies (Kale, Singh, & Perlmutter, 2000) and trustees as members of boards at the apex of these organisations play a pivotal role in defining and influencing these.

Strategy as narrative practice

Strategy as narrative forms part of a body of literature which focusses on strategy as practice (SAP). This body of literature emerged in the 1990s with seminal papers such as Barry and Elms (1997). Research in this area has gained in popularity due to its capacity to investigate the micro processes of strategy, which up until then had been relatively neglected in favour of approaches which focus on the effects of strategy. Brown and Thompson (2013) echo Fenton and Langley (2011) in arguing that narrative approaches support a more systemic view of strategy and strategy development, whilst encompassing the need to listen to the multiple voices in organisations rather than focusing on those at the top. This is particularly relevant for collaborative organisations in which leadership is distributed throughout the organisation, a practice which is often espoused in the school sector.

Narrative approaches have revealed the capacity 'to see what is agreed upon by all organisational members, that which is shared only within certain groups, and that which is fragmented and ambiguous' (ibid, pg. 1149). This fragmentation is both productive and tension filled, as individuals and groups work through processes and power struggles to create strategic narratives that permeate organisational discourses and are either rejected or become accepted into organisational cultures. The method is not without its critics, particularly within the field of critical management studies. For example, Blom and Alvesson (2015) criticise the field of SAP studies more broadly, for its focus on the micro processes of strategy at what they see as the expense of issues around power and identity. But this study agrees with other authors in the SAP field and the field of identity work in arguing that narratives are a powerful source of the articulation of power struggles and identity and that these elements are important in the processes and thinking behind strategic decision making (Johnson, Balogun, & Beech, 2010).

Barry and Elmes' (1997, p.5), definition of strategy is useful in defining the relationship between strategy and narrative:

> The narrative view of strategy stresses how language is used to construct meaning, it explores the ways that organisational stakeholders create a discourse of direction [..] to understand and influence one another's actions. Whereas traditional strategy frameworks virtually ignore the role of language in strategic decision making, a narrative approach assumes that telling of strategy fundamentally influence strategic choice and action, often in unconscious ways.

In adopting the narrative approach, information sourcing is often framed as part of a social process, culturally acquired:

We have employed a narrative approach in other research projects in order to obtain a more holistic view of the ways in which the ways in which, "the apparently independent and disconnected elements of existence are seen as related parts of a whole" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p: 36). In so doing we also draw on Linde's coherence system 'a discursive practice that represents a system of beliefs and relations between beliefs; it provides the environment in which one statement may or may not be taken as the cause of another statement" (Linde, 1993, p.163).

Methods

To address our research questions, and in line with the theoretical framework outlined above, the study was embedded within a social constructivist approach (Vaara, Kleymann, & Seristö, 2004)

The research was based on 30 semi structured interviews with Trustees and CEOs working in 6 MATs. Trustees - those at the apex of the organisation were chosen rather than interviewing chairs and board members at individual academies. The CEO is the operational lead of the MAT and is sometimes referred to as Executive Head. Trustees were chosen due to previous research identifying that trusts are strategically driven by strategic planning at trust level, this is particularly true in terms of expansion strategies. (See Baxter, 2016, 2017). The MATS are situated in the North (4) and South of England (2). They are not able to be identified due to confidentiality issues. The interviews were carried out within the period December 2017 to June 2018. They lasted between 45 minutes to one hour each (questions are located in appendix 01). They were carried out via skype, in person and by phone. The research also draws on 10 interviews with national leaders of governance (NCL, 2013). National Leaders of Governance (NLGs) are experienced chairs of governors (COG) who support chairs of governors in other schools.

The NLGs chosen for this study were situated locally to the MATs under scrutiny. In virtually all cases, they combine their advisory role with one of chair – of a MAT, a school within a MAT or a single academy or maintained school.

The research gained approval from the ethics committees of the two universities involved. Informed consent protocols were drawn up and approved by respondents before interviews commenced. Due to the sensitive nature of this research, this included anonymity of trusts as well as individuals (see conclusion). The sample is located in Appendix 02.

Data Analysis

The interviews were coded using NVivo software and analysed using the framework in figure two. Data analysis considered key themes emerging from both documentary analysis and interview data. Having successfully adopted the narrative approach in other research which investigates strategic discourse in MATs, and sense making on governing boards (Baxter forthcoming, 2016a, Baxter 2017,), 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). In so doing we also drew on Linde's coherence system of narrative (mentioned earlier), as 'a discursive practice that represents a system of beliefs and relations between beliefs,' (Linde, 1993, p.163). Using this approach in complex governance arrangements, allowed for the building up of a picture of the challenges inherent within the subject under scrutiny, whilst also revealing the ways in which boards are attempting to meet them. As there were two very specific but interlinked strands of inquiry within the research the data were coded according to the principals, ideals, values and objectives of the respondents. This involved all researchers reading and coding each transcript individually, then discussing, merging and

reflecting on these codes to form larger categories and emerging conceptual themes, then further analysing these themes by comparing and contrasting them across the data sets and to the study's conceptual framework. Studying the narratives of the participants in this way allowed examination of elements that, 'recurrently, routinely and persistently animate the actors.' (Cooren et al, 2015, p.368). This method has been used in explorations of strategy as communication when exploring the extent to which actors defend certain strategic positions, account for or dis-align from an action (page, 369); as such it offers insight into the drive behind adherence to a certain course of action. In addition to the empirical data, schemes of delegation and strategic plans were also scrutinized. These were analysed according to their aims and ideals. The webpages of the MATs were included in the documentary analysis, again these were scrutinized for their strategic goals, missions, values and stated aims.

Findings and discussion: Collaborative governance

The findings and discussion are, according to narrative convention, discussed in one section under two broad headings. Where quotes are included they are identified as follows: T=trustee, CH-Chair Trustees, and CEO=Executive Headteacher, along with the number of the MAT.

Principal drivers for strategic expansion in MATS?

As we outlined earlier, collaborative governance draws primarily on literature describing new patterns of government and governing. Organisations are brought together to govern society, contribute to public value, implement public policy or manage public programmes or assets in a collaboration arrangement. The findings revealed that there was a strong focus on acquisition of and management of resources in terms of MAT, along with implementation of public policy and some evidence of public value creation: The creation of new organisations serving a particular need within education. The results are presented in terms of the seven broad categories listed below in figures 1. In order to illustrate the linked quality of the findings, they are presented in three main areas: Opportunities, values and resources; Accountability and competition and feelings and learning.

Figure 1 Mat Drivers for expansion

According to our conceptual framework the drivers can also be categorised into broad areas of governing society; contribution to public value and implementation of public policy

Governing schools: Opportunities, Values and Resources

We begin this section with a focus on the opportunities, values and resources that appeared to drive strategic decisions within the MATs. As data on these themes overlapped considerably, they are considered together rather than imposing a separation of the data, which may have obfuscated key links and insights. There was a clear focus from some MATs on maximising new opportunities that had emerged due to the policy climate, thus creating a business opportunity for the MAT to extend their offering either by acquiring valuable resources or new knowledge, that would benefit the whole MAT. This finding reflects some elements of a resource-based approach to strategy. Deriving from the corporate sector this view is focused upon competitive advantage, it describes organisations as unique clusters of resources and capabilities making possible a range of differing strategies and different performance (Prahalad & Hamel, 2004): For example, a MAT in this study that had built capacity to care for students both in school and outside of it , as the Chair reported:

> We've got a caretaker's house, he's long gone so we've had it refitted for free by a sponsor, and we now use it for sleepovers. Where children from the trust can go and sleep over and learn life skills. (CT, 2).

The narratives overall, reflected a wish to spread their values and ethos and in so doing develop their existing provision, whilst ensuring their financial sustainability. But the example of collaboration between MATs, above, is comparatively rare as one National Leader of Governance explained:

> They're not looking to do joint things with other MATs they just have a silo approach. (NLG).

The lack of collaboration between MATs is concerning from a collaborative governance perspective as, in the longer-term, competition between MATS may result in fragmented governance and institutional isomorphism: Factors proven to constrain innovation and create the type of silo approach that organisational collaboration is designed to eradicate (Sørensen & Torfing, 2011).

In the third sector Vangen points out that inter- collaborative networks are rare (2015). But signs in this study show that the early stages of collaborations between MATS, who share aspirations with other MATS, such as the widespread provision of special schools, (SS), are appearing and is an encouraging response to a long-standing problem (Bloom,2018).

Throughout the study it emerged that religious MATs were realising possibilities that hitherto had not existed for them. As these schools already had experience of federated structures (grouping together without trust status), their thinking in terms of governance and expansion appeared, in contrast to MATS without a definitive ethos, to be more advanced as this CT reports:

> People know us, they know our ethos, so schools approach us- if they like what we stand for then they know what they are signing up for. (CT-7).

In terms of serving and connecting to school communities, there was a very strong focus on this: This MAT trustee describes how this would work positively for their school communities:

> In terms of communities: we believe really, for practical purposes if we can get children from age two and keep them in a MAT school then it is within our destiny to give them the best possible education. Because we all know that lots of kids are arriving pre-school and they are so far back in terms of development, that to get them where you would expect them to be is a hell of a push. (CT-7)

In deciding whether to expand or not, the balance of power shifts between the CEO and trustees, with the CEO proposing strategic plans and the trustees agreeing or disagreeing with them. One trustee pointed out that the power of trustees was something that they believed had come as a shock to heads:

> Cos you know, they got used to them [board members] just rubber stamping everything, or at least not presenting powerful arguments – that has rocked their boat now! (CT-4).

Certainly, in this study the business case for expansion is a powerful lever in deciding whether to expand. The lack of finances for schools under present government funding arrangements, (Coughlan, 2018), has led to schools considering whether they can afford to take on failing schools, as these are the very schools that tend to have a large budget deficit, as this trustee pointed out,

> We were asked [by the RC], but we said no. We have too much to deal with budget wise with the schools we have. (CEO-2)

The resources available for the follow through of such aspirations were vital to MAT expansion projects, as this board member points out: 'We have one [school] that's probably going to join us in the future and we think that will be a learning opportunity for the rest of the schools.' (CT-6).

Literature on resource acquisition and knowledge in collaborative organisations, differentiates between knowledge transfer, and the knowledge creation effects of acquisition (Hardy et al, 2003). Defining the first as a strategic effect-a process that happens because of collaboration, whilst knowledge creation is seen far more of a strategic driver. Powell et al argue that the greater the diversity of the organisations within the collaboration, the more likely it will be in generating new knowledge (Powell, 2003, in Hardy et al, 2003). The boards in this study that were actively taking opportunity to expand to acquire new resources, appeared also to be looking to create new knowledge, knowledge that could then be used by the sector to prompt improvements in other MATs. But there was also evidence that in the process of acquiring new knowledge, knowledge would be created that would give certain MATs a competitive advantage. There is little doubt that there is a policy made tension within the system, which on one hand encourages collaboration, and on the other, promotes competition. If learning is to occur within the system, then there needs to be an investigation on the effects of competition between MATs. System wide success will be limited if sharing of good practices between MATs does not become the norm.

Accountability and competition: Pressures and risks in collaborative governance

Moving on from opportunities, values and resources, the next section examines the pressures and risks that drive and limit MAT expansion. As this paper has already pointed out, MATs must tread a careful line between calculated risk and longer-term sustainability. Some MATs were being pressured to expand as this Chair explains:

> We were approached as to whether we would be able to sponsor another school because people had been looking at us, seeing the rigor that we put into it, and the systems, processes, protocols and procedures, And. I suppose you feel flattered by that, but thought, oh my goodness, we've got to start expanding now. We have a five-year plan, we'll just bring that forward. (CT-4).

This pressure being brought to bear by RSCs is concerning. In cases where MATs have grown too quickly there have been numerous problems, even in cases in which their growth was encouraged by policy makers

In MATs whose expansion appeared to be value driven, these values were clearly stated on their websites, in their strategic plans and even within their schemes of delegation. For example, one MAT described themselves as family focused as part of their general value set. This focus appeared through their scheme of delegation, which has a firm focus on communication with families and the community more broadly and is reflected in their governance, as well as within their strategic plan, which envisaged their growth in terms of the ways in which it could best serve the communities in which schools (or prospective schools) are situated.

According to the National Leaders of Governance, MATs with a strong and firm value system which permeated their strategic decision making, were more organised in terms of the ways in which their governance was structured, as this NLG reported, 'it's clear where they are going and why they are going there, they've thought about it, that's clear too.' (NLG). They also had a far firmer focus on the school communities within their organisation as this CEO reflected:

> Some of our areas are quite tough and we've got a great primary head, and her view is, I want to get them as young as I can, because the more influence good teachers can exert, the better their prospects will be (CEO-4).

There was only one MAT in this study whose trustees appeared to lack vision, so it is difficult to form conclusions as to whether the NLG view is indeed true. But research on strategy across the public sector, indicates that lack of vision and direction , underpinned by core values inhibits growth and can

leave organisations effectively lacking direction, and leaving the field open to more focused organisations (Kohtamäki et al., 2008).

In cases where MATS were dealing with challenging schools, practice was divided: Interviewees from 2 MATS had a very firm focus on results of schools in the area but made little mention of community. However, in the case of one MAT, the CEO and Chair of Trustees had made the decision to go to community organisation meetings to see how the MAT could best serve ethnic and religious communities. In so doing they were actively creating new knowledge on the needs of the community relative to the school, whilst concomitantly sharing insights from within the MAT.

There were two kinds of pressure identified within this study, these were closely associated with risk as illustrated in figure 3. The first kind of pressure /risk is external (to the MAT), the second, pertains to pressures and risks that are focused internally, within the MAT. The accountability regime is undoubtedly the cause of substantial pressures on the organisation; these include tension between, on one hand, the pressure to grow and on the other, the considerable pressure to perform. The pressure to grow emanates not solely from RSCs but from the accountability environment; They are held to account by Ofsted (the schools inspectorate), RSCs and the Education and skills Funding Agency for England (formed 2017). As the previous section outlined, they are also operating in a highly competitive marketplace in which failing schools or failing MATs are quickly shut down and their schools re-brokered (via the Department for Education). There is considerable pressure on government that, having pushed for academisation and multi- academy trusts, to ensure that this policy will succeed and that MATs will not only demonstrate their collaborative advantage through enhanced learning outcomes for learners, but also prove that collaboration works. Successful MATs also face pressures that are in part internal and in part external, in terms of the pressure to maintain their good reputations. As one strategic plan states:

> [By year 5] The trust and its partners [will be] providing sector-leading services and support for other schools and settings in the wider region. (MAT 01 strategic plan page 12).

The same plan also visions the MAT as, ‘a National leader in helping to shape the MAT landscape (MAT 01, p.11). However, as the previous section reported, this is not unproblematic, as the marketised environment is not on the whole, conducive to collaboration.

Figure 3 Pressures on MAT Boards

As Figure 3 illustrates, pressures are felt at institutional level and also from the external social, economic and political context in which MATs are situated. They must consider organisational risk whilst also dealing with the pressures that are engendered through the competitive environment. Maintaining this balance is challenging for those tasked with leading and governing the organisation.

Internal pressures manifest as both risks for the organisation and for the learner. Trusts face the complexity and ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel and Webber 1973, 15) faced by most schools, but on a larger scale. They must provide for learners in both deprived areas and those in more economically buoyant situations. The challenges for the governance and operationalisation of effectively doing both, are considerable. One MAT Chair of Trustees described the process of taking on poor schools in poor areas as ‘brutal’:

> We had to lose the head and the deputy stepped down [….] and it feels very brutal.

Another CEO described how financially impoverished some schools are, at the point when they join the MAT, stating that if those schools fail to meet their 5% reserves by the end of a three-year period, ‘We then ask them, how high are your staffing costs?’ (MAT CEO).

In terms serving the needs of school communities, it was not clear to what extent MATs primarily driven by these forms of accountability, considered them, apart from a rather nebulous aim to 'raise standards.' Which of course in the longer term is assumed to exert a positive effect on communities. There was however, a concerning lack of evidence in this study that MAT boards that appeared driven to expand purely because of accountability /competition drivers paid much attention to the communities they were taking on as well as the schools. The key drivers appeared to be avoidance of risk and decisions based on sound financial planning (see also sections 6, and 7). This in the longer term could prove detrimental to both cohesion within the trust and lack of a cohesive governance structure, as layers within the trust governance cease to trust one another and end up working towards different goals (Huxham & Vangen, 2013).

Expansion: Feelings and Learning

The previous sections dealt with elements that directly and indirectly influence the growth or limitation of growth of MATs; but within these elements, the data indicate that there are two areas that have not yet been covered. The first, 'feelings' emerged due to the strength of feeling attached to certain elements within the narratives. This is what Cooren et al (2015), term '[matters] of concern': the things that appear to 'count, matter or make a difference' (p, 368), to the narrator. The second; 'learning': Creating these organisations is a work of bricolage which involves consideration of a range of complex and often competing priorities whilst maintaining a strong, coherent and financially solvent organisation. This, according to the narratives, engenders a great deal of learning, on the part of those tasked with organisational governance and leadership. This section discusses both feelings and learning and how they play out in terms of organisational strategy.

Feelings were aspects that appeared foremost in the interlocutors' minds throughout their narrative: Powerful discourses that permeate the narratives and colour and condition responses; emanating from official or non-official sources (Samra-Fredericks, 2005). These 'feelings' often justified in terms of business decision making, particularly in relation to a perceived marketized environment.. The word 'predatory' and 'opportunistic' occurred frequently to describe other MATs within the environment, as these board members described:

> Frankly there are some very predatory MATS out there (T-4)

Business-like was often a term used to describe these MATs in a derogatory way: 'They are entirely business like and entirely predatory', (T-2). Yet, concomitantly, feelings relating to the need to expand or be consumed by other MATs, were nearly always justified as sound business sense by respondents.

The emphasis on the market and the need to be competitive extended even to those MATs whose values were at the very forefront of their expansion projects. A strong sense of 'grow or be swallowed up' permeated several of the narratives and came across as a key area of concern. This theme was particularly prevalent in those MATs that had only been established in the last 2 years

Finance featured as a strong factor in decision making processes. As one trustee told us,

> We must be firm, cos who are we going to end up getting stuck with…one school can commit the organisation to something that is incredibly cumbersome financially and bring it to its knees…. (CT-3).

The business planning of trust expansions featured strongly in decisions about strategy – in many ways trustees referred to the business plan and the strategy almost interchangeably, with survival as a bottom line, as one Chair put it: 'We are looking around and wondering, how on earth will we survive? '(CT-5).

Another reflected on the extent to which financial planning and business sustainability coloured their thinking telling us,

> 'We talk a lot about financing our trust, the reason why a trust fails is because it's grown for the wrong reason [….] or they don't have the capacity to turn them round, or there's no money (CT- 4).

In business terms the narratives were conflicted. On one hand, as sections 1 and 2 reflected, respondents argued that MATS were founded on values. Yet, on the other the word hand, finances appeared to take precedence when deciding to expand or remain the same size. Indeed, the word finance/finances appeared no less than 200 times in the narratives and business managers and their concerns appeared as principal agents in any strategic considerations.

In terms of learning, the activity of strategy making in MATs appeared as an emergent, learning and business planning process, as reflected in the literature on strategy as practice (Fenton & Langley, 2011; Jarzabkowski, 2004). Tensions around power and identity arising during the act of strategy making created new possibilities for development, as this CEO reported:

> [You can] look at the tensions and you can think, oh god, yes. Or you can look at the tensions and say these are helpful, these are another form of checks and balances about how we move towards getting a coherent and cohesive structure that promotes improvement.

Trustee perceptions of CEO capacity and capabilities in terms of strategy making very much reflected both challenge and opportunity in setting strategic direction and balancing risks and innovation, as this trustee reflected:

> [Getting] governors… and the staff. Even the, even the principal, who's become the CEO of that MAT, to think differently. […..] You are no longer head of this school. You are CEO of three schools. (CEO-4)

This issue appeared to be particularly challenging for those trustees and CEOs who had moved from a single school up to becoming either CEOs or trustees.

In terms of the power needed to make strategic decisions, another paper in this series (see Baxter, 2019), analysing schemes of delegation in MATs found that powers accorded to Academy level boards, particularly in the area of strategy making, were very weak. This supports the findings of this paper in revealing that strategic thinking is very much the responsibility of the CEO and Trustees and strongly linked to the business plan for the whole trust.

Conclusions and Implications for future research

Drawing from the field of strategy as practice this article employed a narrative approach in order to probe beyond official strategic positions of English MATs as articulated on their websites and strategic plans, in order to uncover the distinctive principal drivers behind MAT expansion. In so doing it examined how the governance of relatively recent collaborations in education plays out within the overall aims of collaborative governance: The research has made a distinct and original contribution to knowledge in terms of the strategic governance of collaborations of public service organisations, a field relatively underdeveloped from the literature on the governance of multi-level organisations. We conclude this paper by outlining the ways in which this was achieved.

The strategy as narrative approach revealed that since the Education Reform Act of 1988 introduced local management of schools (LMS) the English education environment has become increasingly competitive, but this policies may well backfire as the lack of collaboration

between MATs which emerged during this study appears to be having a detrimental effect on strategy as learning. While the research revealed innovation and the will of some MATs to resolve intractable educational problems in terms of provision, such as the expansion of special school provision and the will to provide opportunities for lifelong learning. But the lack of inter –MAT collaboration is likely to place limits on this in the longer term, as MATs become more institutionally isomorphic in nature. This trend is well recognised across the rest of the private and public sector (Sørensen et al,2011).

Those schools who lack a strong vision and mission and refuse to be pressurized to expand beyond their capacity are better positioned to succeed than those who let themselves be talked into expansion before they are ready. But the system is in difficulties: Recent reports illustrate that the DfE is struggling to find sponsors to take on failing schools, as a consequence, these schools are stuck in a 'no man's land, between MATs and LEAs. In addition, the number of re-brokerings has increased dramatically- 255 academy schools moved to another trust in the financial year 2017-18; an increase of around 30 per cent compared to the same period a year previous, or a 1,114 per cent increase compared to the financial year ending 2014. This is costly to the taxpayer; estimated to be around £17 million per year (Andrews, 2018). The research also revealed that MATs are coming under great pressure to bring forward their expansion plans, often risking their financial stability. Such organisations are mindful of the challenges this poses, particularly in taking on schools running a deficit and whose performance is well below par.

In order to try and combat this Trustees were clearly operating a SWOT analysis (Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) approach to expansion, with the constant fear of failure or financial ruin driving their attitude to risk: Research has shown that this process, in the longer term, will stifle innovation (Sørensen et al,2011), the very innovation that the policy was designed to encourage.

The research also revealed challenges relating to power and identity of the boards involved in decision making processes and supports the findings of another paper in this series (Baxter , 2019), in highlighting the importance and difficulties operating as a single organisation: As Vangen et al report, this is the reason in the third sector, why so many of these organisations eventually fail (Vangen, et al, 2015).

The iterative learning aspects of strategy as practice for both CEO and trustees stresses the importance of trustees working closely with CEOs and local headteachers and boards. Yet, as this study reports, the larger the organisation, the more challenging this becomes. Adopting Brown and Thompson's view that (2013) narrative approaches support a more systemic view of strategy and strategy development, whilst encompassing the need to listen to the multiple voices in organisations rather than focusing on those at the apex of those organisations- the study has shown the need for more research in investigating those working at local level within MATs , particularly in relation to whether they feel that they are gaining value for money in joining the trust, and how membership has impacted on their ability to serve their local communities. It particularly highlights the need for research with individual academy head teachers and chairs of Academy Level Boards, in order to establish exactly what they feel their role is in influencing the strategic direction of the organisation. It is clear from another study, carried out as part of this project that academy level boards are given little power in terms of strategy making, yet their input is vital in order to ensure that our school system is genuinely democratic (Baxter 2016). Any further study should also consider harvesting the views of other key stakeholders such as parents, LAs and other school staff in order to find out whether these organisations contribute to a democratic school system.

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Diagrams

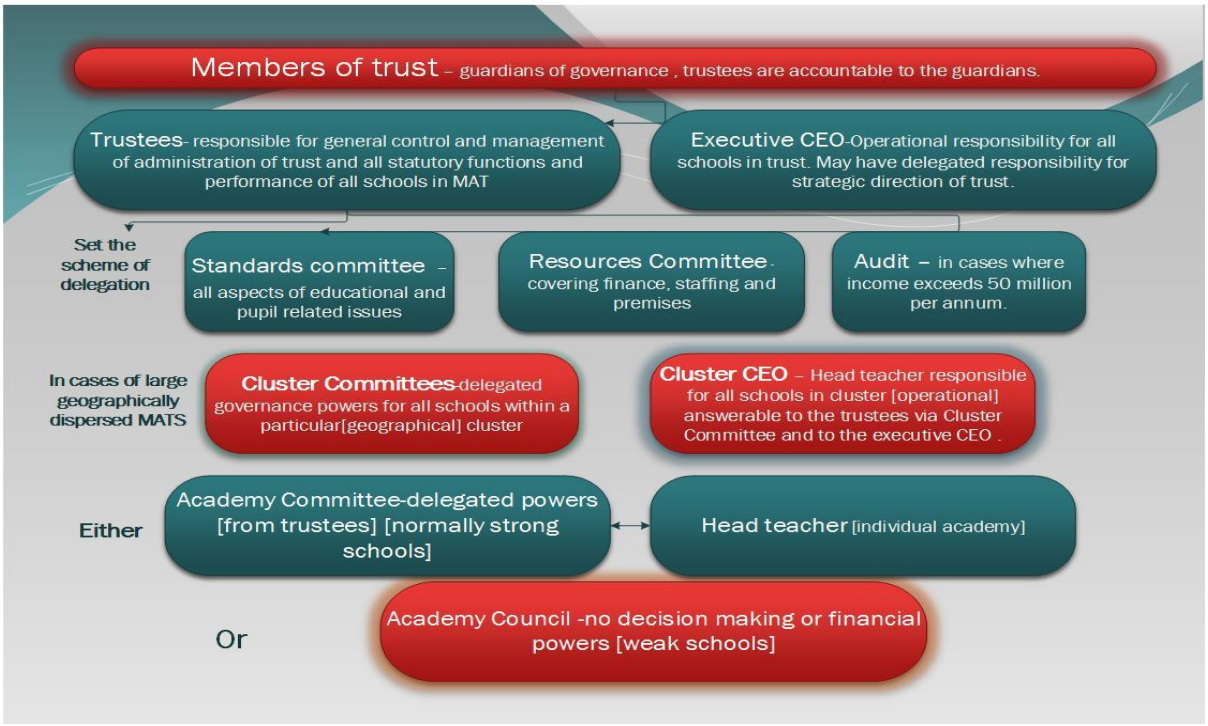

Figure 1 adapted from Baxter 2018

1. **Opportunities** – the taking advantage of opportunities that the present legislation now allows for – for example, creating a consortium of special schools that cross local authority boundaries (and were traditionally constrained by them).
2. **Values**: in some cases, these were stated on websites and in strategic plans, but appeared throughout some of the narratives of individual interviewees.
3. **Pressures**- these appeared solely within the narratives and assumed several guises. Pressures were classifiable as internal to the organisation or external to the organisation.
4. **Risks** – these could also be seen as pressures but are placed in a separate category due to their predominantly external features.
5. **Resources** – the opportunities that partnership offers to obtain resources not available as a single school.
6. **Feelings**. This category was created to include rationale that fell into none of the above categories. They were articulated throughout the interview data and appeared to be based on either individual feelings or on vague unformulated reported discourses occurring at either trustee board level or academy board level.
7. **Learning and development**-the extent to which strategizing has been an iterative/learning process.

Figure 2 Mat Drivers for expansion

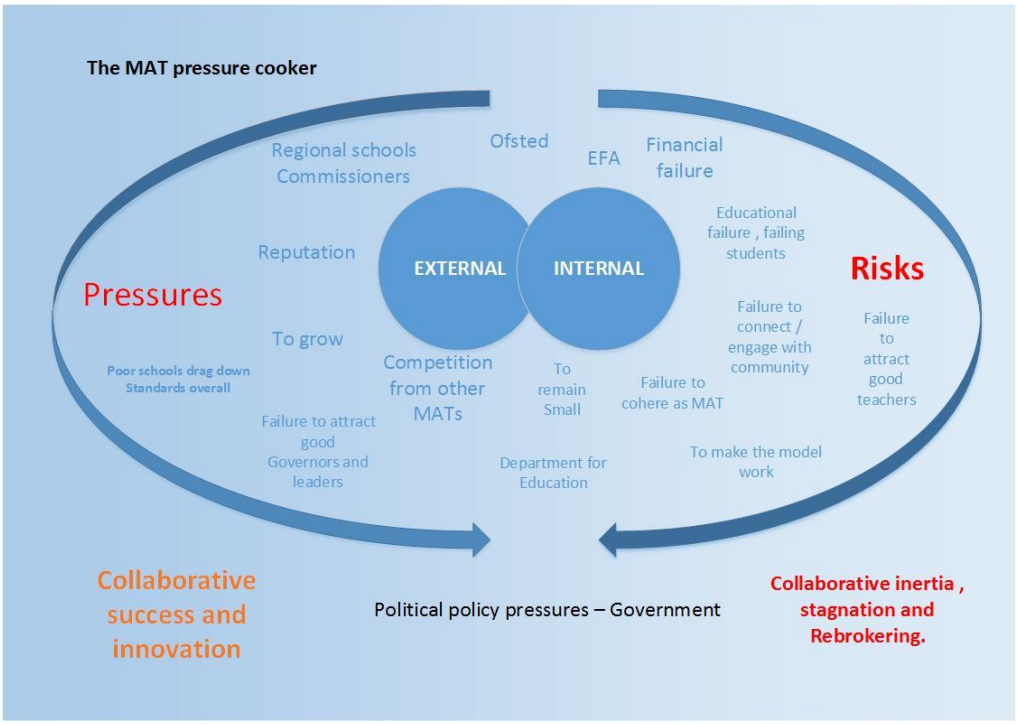

Figure 3 Pressures on MAT Boards