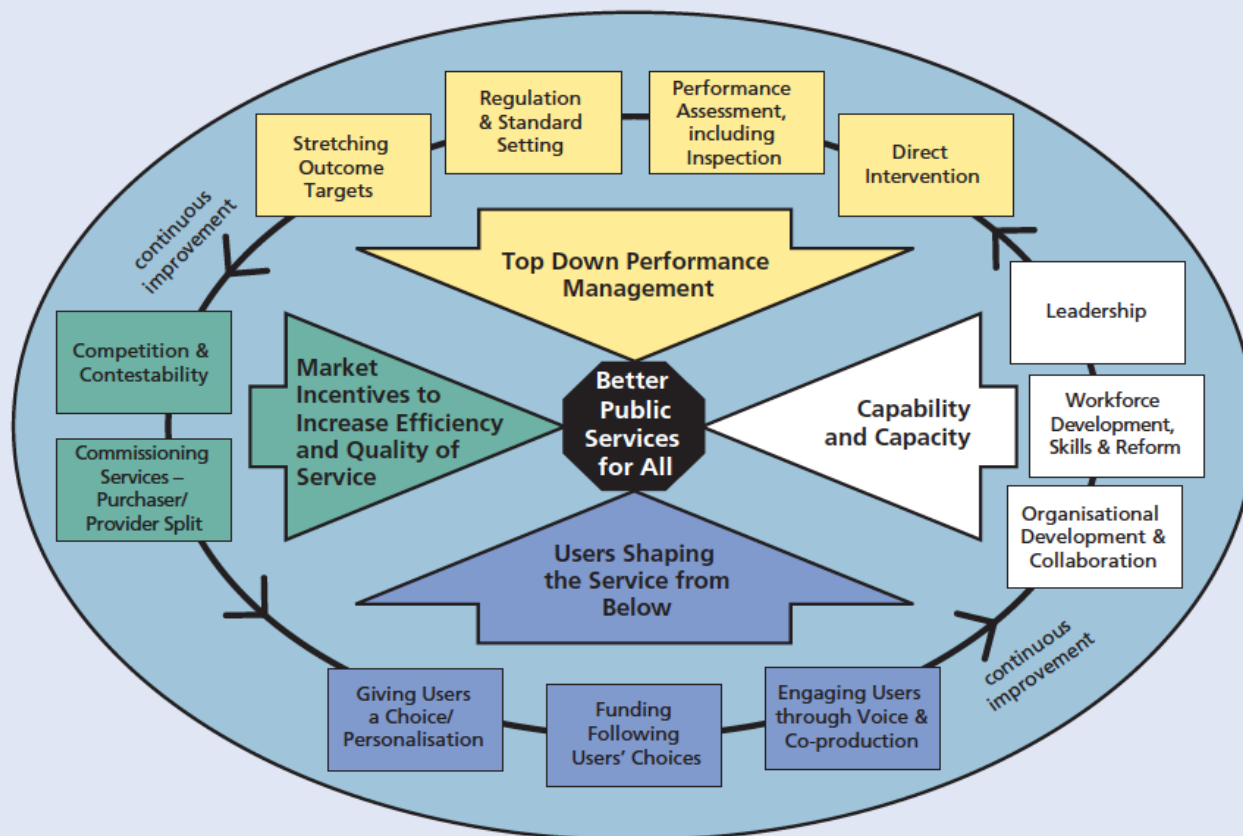# Hierarchy, Markets and Networks:

analysing the 'self-improving school-led system' agenda in England and the implications for schools

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Origins of the self-improving system in policy

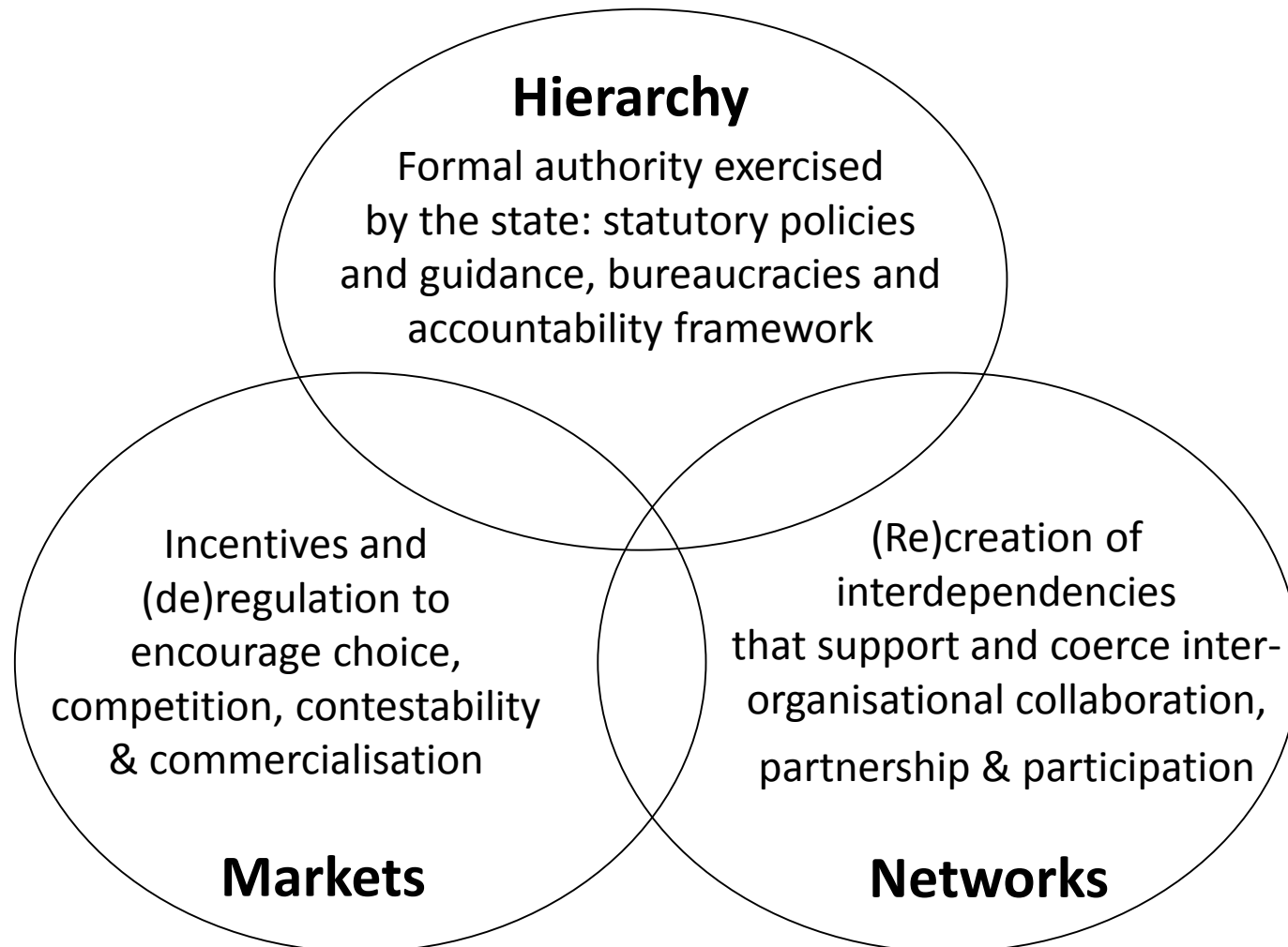Chart A: The UK Government's Model of Public Service Reform – A Self-Improving System

A tailored combination of elements that together create "a 'self-improving system' because incentives for continuous improvement and innovation are embedded within it"

Cabinet Office, 2006: 4

The self-improving system as a policy agenda

"The primary responsibility for improvement rests with schools … the attempt to secure automatic compliance with (government) priorities reduces the capacity of the system to improve itself. Instead our aim should be to create a school system which is *more effectively self-improving*. …

• The introduction of new providers to the system… is an important part of this

• The best schools and leaders to take greater responsibility and extend their reach

• We will reduce duties, requirements and guidance on all schools

• We will dismantle the apparatus of central control and bureaucratic compliance

• We will make direct accountability more meaningful… (with) much more information about schools available… to enable parents and others to assess and compare their performance."

The Importance of Teaching White Paper, DfE, 2010: 66-73

Conceptualising the policy agenda

Hierarchy

Formal authority exercised by the state: statutory policies and guidance, bureaucracies and accountability framework

Incentives and (de)regulation to encourage choice, competition, contestability & commercialisation

Markets

(Re)creation of interdependencies that support and coerce inter-organisational collaboration,

partnership & participation

Networks

Understanding the 'self-improving system' – research questions

- How are school leaders interpreting and responding to the 'self-improving system' agenda?

- To what extent are 'deep' school to school partnerships emerging and how do these differ by phase, context and leadership approach?

- To what extent do emergent local models represent a genuine basis for school-led improvement that meets the needs of all schools?

- What factors support and hinder the development of robust school-led approaches and what are the implications for leaders and leadership?

- What is the evidence of impact on pupil outcomes for multi-academy trusts? How does this differ by size of MAT?

- What trends can be observed in Ofsted ratings over the period 2005–15 and how, if at all, do these relate to changes in school characteristics?

Project design and methods

**Phase 1 Localities Research**: 2015 - 2016

- 4 areas – high/low densities of academies & system leadership designations

- 47 primary & secondary school case studies - 164 interviews with staff

- 18 system informant interviews

Phase 2 Quantitative strands: 2015 – 2017

- National survey of head teachers – c 700 responses

- Analysis of the impact of Multi-Academy Trusts

- Analysis of Ofsted results and student composition over a 10 year period

Hierarchy: accountability and constrained professionalism

Making sure my school does well in Ofsted inspections is one of my top priorities as a leader (n=624)
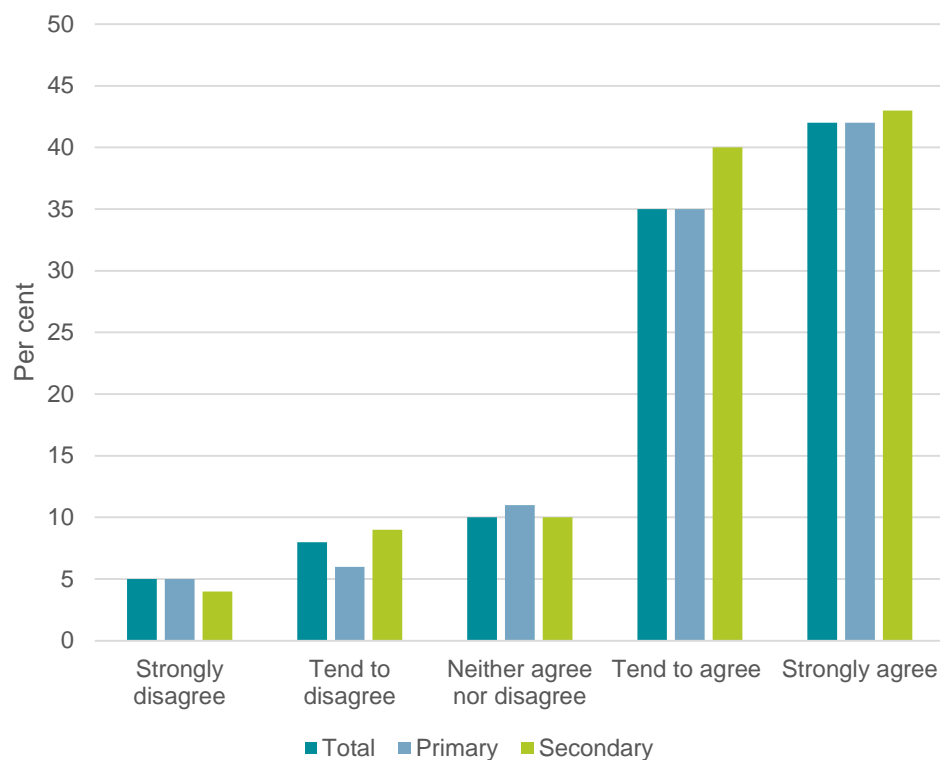
- Pressure to narrow focus onto attainment and progress in tests
- Spotting 'new rules of the game'
- Increasingly punitive and concerned with consistency
- Perverse incentives to prioritise interests of school over needs of particular groups of children
- Impact on professionalism - stress and loss of motivation
- Minority of schools resist

Hierarchy: normalisation and 'self-policing'

Someone wrote about the panopticon, 'that we are all self-policing now' ... that we don't have to have Ofsted every year, yet that is what [a national organization] is offering. ... It looks just like Ofsted. So, yes, it's a sharing of data, but it's only because you paid all the money for it; you have to. There's a selectiveness about what data is shared; it's shared in a transactional relationship: you give me a judgment that I can then use in my Ofsted report, when it comes around.

Principal, secondary convertor academy, Ofsted Outstanding

Hierarchy: chaotic centralisation

- Chaotic centralisation: tensions & congestion

- Middle tier commercialisation & network governance

- An increasingly co-opted managerial elite

My perspective, previously, was that it was chaos in the programme. I was shocked, to be honest.

Regional Schools Commissioner

They're an LA that has had an anti-academy stance. So, our work has been difficult, and they've not been particularly receptive to our solutions.

Regional Schools Commissioner

There's a trade in MBEs & knighthoods for serving heads... an emergent cohort of people who are very strong, because they were Wave 1 Teaching Schools ... or are getting elected to the Teaching Schools Council.

Principal, secondary convertor academy, Ofsted Outstanding

Markets: positioning in local status hierarchy

There is a clear local hierarchy of schools in my area, in terms of their status and popularity with parents (n=624)
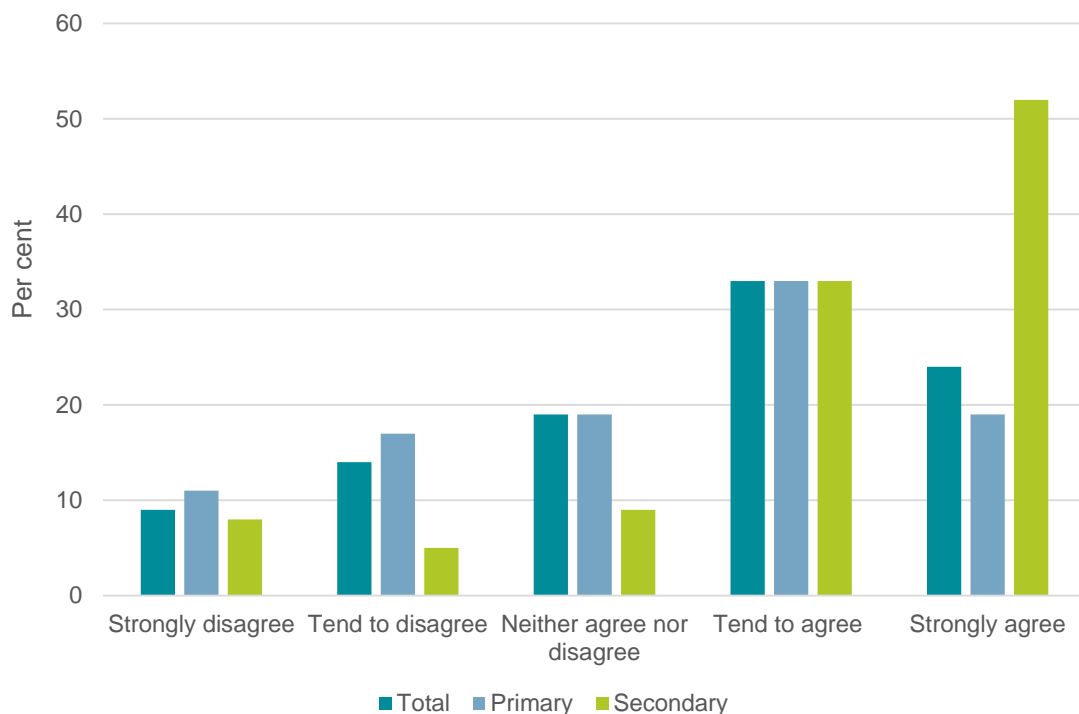
Status influenced by:
- Student attainment
- Ofsted judgement
- School context
- Student composition
- Educational 'offer'

Entrepreneurial and tactical responses: mix of cream skimming, strategic truces and slow authentic improvement

Markets: selective competition

We work very hard with the portrayal of the school, the image of the school, marketing, pulling parents in … it is a very, very competitive group [of schools] and it doesn't sit easily with my values as a teacher, but everybody wants those bright, sharp, well-motivated, middle class children who are going to get the top grades, and they do. … It's who has which children. Well it is isn't it? [pause] I'm sorry to say that. It shouldn't really be like that.

Headteacher, secondary academy converter, Ofsted Outstanding

Markets: regulation and student composition

Changes in primary schools FSM levels between 2005-10 and 2010-15 by 2010 Ofsted rating		
Ofsted	**Diff**	**N**
Outstanding	-0.1664	1,592
Good	-0.0749	5,821
Satisfactory/RI	0.0274	3,999
Inadequate	0.0974	315

Changes in secondary schools FSM levels between 2005-10 and 2010-15 by 2010 Ofsted rating		
Ofsted	**Diff**	**N**
Outstanding	-0.1598	601
Good	-0.0611	1,163
Satisfactory/RI	0.0160	881
Inadequate	0.1244	105

Markets in support services: three ideal-typical 'outstanding' primary schools

Protect: isolationist and protected expertise

- "We can solve our own problems"
- "Buy in specific expertise we need"
- Not interested in open ended collaboration
- Looking to build a MAT, but hard to find willing participants

Sell: entrepreneurial, commoditisation

- Selling expertise: "we want to make money"
- Trading arm for CPD on Ofsted preparation, 'leadership'
- Federated primary - the "worked example"
- Branded provider

Share: open source knowledge building

- Focus on learning with local schools: "mutual expertise"
- Seen as ideal collaborator locally
- Uncomfortable with school to school interventions
- Challenges in funding

Networks: school to school partnerships more important since 2010

Which of the following best describes your strongest partnership? (n=624)
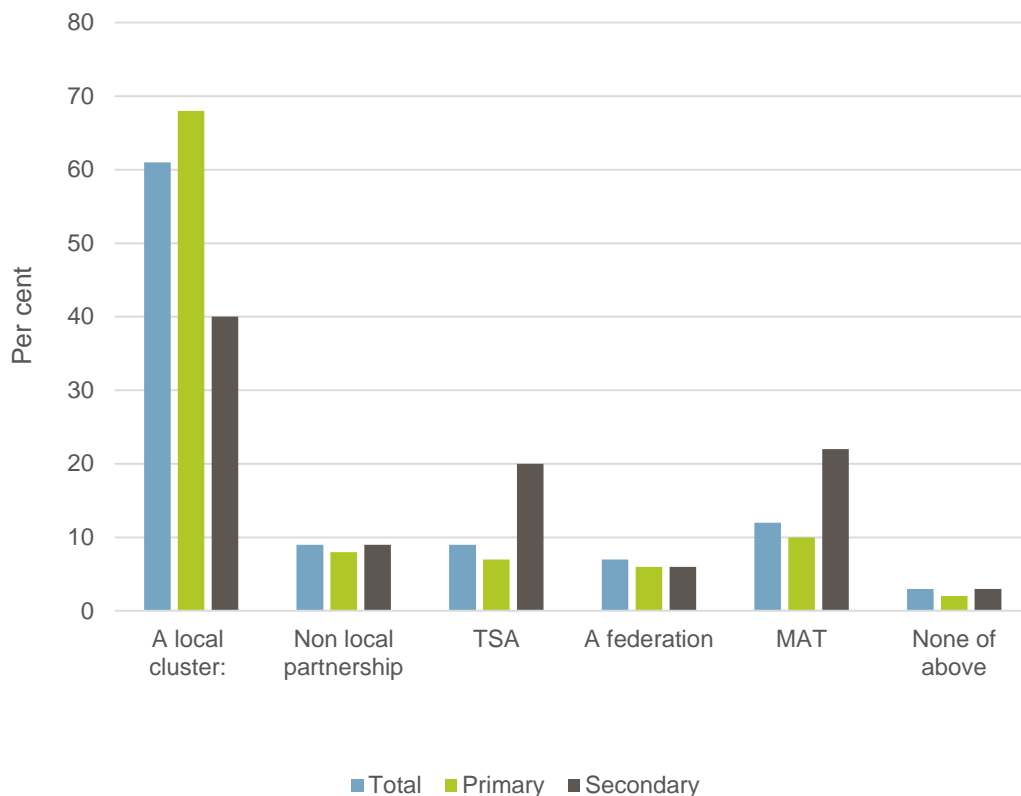
- Benefits: professional learning, improvement support, social capital

- Local clusters widespread and diverse – but notable phase differences

- Minority can be described as 'deep' and 'inclusive', but majority under-developed and rely on coalitions of the willing, able or invited

Teaching School Alliances – hierarchical, exclusive and marketised networks

SUCCESS appeared, because we felt we couldn't wait. The world was changing around us, and if we didn't do something, we'd be left on our own. I think it's unfortunate that probably the six strongest schools in [the cluster] formed SUCCESS. And that was to our shame, a little bit, I think, that the egalitarianism stopped. And I think that our vulnerable schools within [the cluster], within the locality, are on their own, because they weren't able or willing to join.

I think it's a capitalist model. It's about school-to-school competition, and the government's very hot on that and, for that, there are winners and losers. And right now, I've taken the pragmatic, yet morally dubious position of 'I want to be with the winners', and that means I have to leave out some losers, some people who are vulnerable, on the outside.

Head teacher, primary maintained, Ofsted Good

Multi-Academy Trusts: single legal entities

- Prescribed models from private and voluntary sectors

- Standardisation and focus on results

- "Local solutions" – fear, fragmentation and formalisation of local hierarchies

What *we are prescribing very much* is that clarity on the skillset that you need, at trust board level, but also… CEO level. Where we get [MATs] where that looks unclear… we will challenge robustly on that to be *absolutely clear what the model is*, because *we* need a direct line of accountability.

Regional School Commissioner (emphasis added)

We know that some of the most successful [MATs] don't muck about with thinking about autonomy… It's plan A, and that's what everybody does.

MAT Chief Executive

Size matters: attainment and progress in Multi-Academy Trusts

Pressure to grow - alleged economies of scale:

"The sweet spot is perhaps somewhere between 12 and 20 schools."

Lord Agnew, North Academies Conference, 2017

	MAT size by number of schools				
	2	3	4-6	7-15	16+
Primaries in MATs, by maintained schools	No significance, but positive difference	**Significant and Positive**	**Significant and Positive**	**Significant and Positive**	No significance, but negative difference
Primaries in MATs, by standalone academies	No significance, but positive difference	**Significant and Positive**	No significance, but positive difference	No significance, but positive difference	No significance, but negative difference
Secondaries in MATs, by maintained schools	**Significant and Positive**	No significance, but positive difference	No significance, but positive difference *	No significance, but positive difference	**Significant and Negative****
Secondaries in MATs, by standalone academies	**No significance, but positive difference**	No significance, but negative difference	No significance, and neutral difference	No significance, but positive difference	**Significant and Negative**

Analysis

-   Rhetoric of a 'self-improving system' based on self-organizing 'deep' partnerships is a partial, idealised account. Rather, further evolution of New Public Management – as 'coercive autonomy':

    -   strengthening state authority and competitive incentives, with networks operating in the shadows of hierarchy and markets

    -   reduced local authority co-ordination, new operational freedoms but the ironies of 'isolated schools' and less locally accountable bureaucracies in MATs

-   The 'local' as both "fatally damaged" and with new spaces for agency.

-   Local responses influenced by history of relationships, context of schools and differential agency of local actors.

Meta-governance: the challenges of 'steering at a distance' and coercing

'System' implies that there's a good degree of articulate design. And I think what's happening nationally is that there are all sorts of systems. The academization of secondary schools, more than primary schools, in fact, has meant that there has been a range of responses. And I don't think it was thought through politically, how to structure that with the loss – no one had really worked out what to do if you lost local authorities. … So, I think there is an education system trying to work out what the system for school-to-school support is. … So, there isn't really *a system*, and I think there are lots of emergent means of managing the problem that was set up. But nobody knows what works.

Principal, secondary academy, Ofsted Outstanding

Front-line leaders: moral dilemmas and institutional self-interest

If we are saying it is a highly moral, ethical TSA or MAT that we are, at some point, we will be tested, about whether our own selfish needs are the ones that we follow, or whether it's a school's genuine needs.

Principal, secondary converter academy, Ofsted Outstanding

There is a paucity there that I think could allow the transfer of power, the transfer of money, the transfer of teaching … if you're a strong Teaching School, and you have a SCITT, where is the clarity that you won't just be creating the best teachers that come through that process, to support your school?

Principal, secondary converter academy, Ofsted Outstanding

Institute of Education

Four overarching themes

1. Commodification of professional knowledge

2. Fragmentation: middle tier, 'winners and losers'

3. Equity: stratification and vulnerable children

4. Legitimacy: local democratic mandate, conflicts of interest and trust