Hierarchy, Markets and Networks

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

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UCL IOE Press

Contents

List of abbreviations

DfE   Department for Education (England)

KS1/2   Key Stages 1 and 2 form the main stages in primary education

KS3/4/5   Key Stages 3, 4 and 5 form the main stages in secondary education

LA   Local authority

LLE   Local Leader of Education

MAT   Multi-academy trust

NCTL   National College for Teaching and Leadership

NLE   National Leader of Education

OECD   Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Ofsted   Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

SISS   The 'self-improving school-led system' agenda promoted in policy since 2010

TSA   Teaching School Alliance

Acknowledgements

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About the authors

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Foreword

Anyone who has recently tried to explain the English education system to overseas visitors will be sharply aware of its startling complexity, so we may sympathize with the school leaders and other professionals who have to navigate it on a daily basis. Is our multi-faceted middle tier working? And is the autonomy and accountability, competition and collaboration that policy-makers have sought to promote generating the desired system improvement – or simply impossible competing demands on professionals? This report, addressing these very questions, could not be more urgent.

In spite of the evident complexity and resulting challenges, and calls for clarification and better alignment from various quarters[1], sorting out our middle tier has not been high on the political agenda. Compared to eye-catching issues in education, teacher recruitment challenges, and Brexit, the technicalities of our education system's governance structures sound tedious, and perhaps trivial. But they comprise the mechanisms for system accountability (to individual pupils and families, in addition to policy-makers), for system improvement, and for safeguarding. In other words, they are absolutely vital, and we overlook them at our peril.

This report focuses on the concept of the self-improving system. In doing so, the research reported addresses all the key agendas at work in the middle tier – different forms and levels of accountability, collaboration and competition, system incentives and constraints, and the parameters of autonomy. Fundamentally, it asks whether the English education system *is* self-improving (or indeed improving), and analyses those elements that facilitate and impede this intention.

The scale and rigour of the research – focused on four different English localities, including 47 school case studies and a survey of school leaders, and coupled with the strength of Greany's and Higham's analytical grip on educational policy-making – ensure credibility and influence for this report. Their mapping of 'multiple sub-systems, with different, partially overlapping "middle tier" organizations holding diverse views on how the school system should be organized' lends credence to calls for clarification in the system. And their diagnosis of 'chaotic centralization', characterized by 'competing claims to authority and legitimacy but diminishing local knowledge about schools' should galvanize policy-makers to urgent action. The report also identifies some of the increasingly traceable consequences for social (in)justice in the schooling system.

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1   House of Commons Education Committee (2017) *Seventh Report of Session 2016–17: Multi-academy trusts*. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmeduc/204/204.pdf;
House of Commons Education Committee (2016) *The Role of Regional Schools Commissioners*. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmeduc/401/40102.htm

Nevertheless, the report also identifies and celebrates the increase in partnerships and meaningful collaborations between schools, and the genuine gains in shared learning and professional development as a result. 'School-to-school' collaboration and learning does appear to have flourished, even as new groupings are also creating new forms of inequality between schools. As such, the report addresses head on the complexity of the outcomes and trends that our complex system has precipitated.

This important report makes a vital contribution to timely debates. The empirical findings provide invaluable evidence to inform educational policy-making towards a productive system that has professional learning and improvement front and centre.

Professor Becky Francis, FAcSS,
Director of UCL Institute of Education

Executive summary

This report analyses how schools in England have interpreted and begun to respond to the government's 'self-improving school-led system' (SISS) policy agenda. While largely undefined in official texts, the SISS agenda has become an overarching narrative for schools policy since 2010, encompassing an ensemble of reforms on academies, the promotion of multi-academy trusts (MATs), the roll back of local authorities (LAs) from school oversight, and the development of new school-to-school support models, such as Teaching School Alliances (TSAs). The government argues that these reforms will 'dismantle the apparatus of central control and bureaucratic compliance' (DfE, 2010: 66) by 'moving control to the frontline' (DfE, 2016b: 8).

While there has been a range of research on specific aspects of these school policy changes, there is as Woods and Simkins (2014) observe a paucity of analysis on how the SISS agenda is influencing change at the local level. This report seeks to address that gap by asking whether or not the models of co-ordination and school support emerging locally since 2010 represent a genuine basis for an equitable and inclusive 'school-led' system. We explore the factors that support and hinder such developments and the implications of this for schools and school leadership.

The research was carried out between 2014 and 2017 and included 47 school case studies across four localities. The localities were selected on the basis that they contained a variety of socio-economic contexts and represented two areas with relatively high densities and two areas with relatively low densities of academies and nationally designated 'system leadership' roles, such as Teaching Schools and National Leaders of Education (NLEs). The research also included a survey of almost 700 school leaders, an analysis of national Ofsted results over a ten-year period and statistical analysis of the impact of MATs on student outcomes.

To inform our analysis we draw on governance theory to analyse the SISS agenda reforms, which we conceive as an attempt to mix and re-balance three overlapping approaches to co-ordinating the school system. These are:

› *Hierarchy* – the formal authority exercised by the state, including through statutory policies and guidance, national, regional and local bureaucracies (including Regional Schools Commissioners [RSCs] and LAs), and performance management and intervention (including through Ofsted inspections and forced academization);

› *Markets* – the incentives and (de)regulation aimed at encouraging choice, competition, contestability and commercialization, including through existing parental choice and funding mechanisms that encourage schools to compete for pupils, and through new policies on academization and free schools and encouragement for a marketplace in school improvement services;

› *Networks* – the (re)creation of interdependencies that support and/or coerce inter-organizational collaboration, partnership and participation (including through the introduction of Teaching School Alliances that are intended to encourage schools to share capacity and expertise).

Informed by these perspectives, we start by exploring the Government's use of the SISS agenda as a policy narrative as well as Hargreaves's (2012) idealized model of a 'self-improving system' founded on 'deep' partnerships, system leadership and a culture of co-creation and local solutions. We review a range of existing evidence on the school system in England since 2010 that highlights, among other things, the diversity of responses to policy change, concerns over capacity and funding, the risks of fragmentation, new inequalities and a 'two-tier' system, and the national pressure for conformity and prescription.

We also locate our research in the context of wider debates on governance and neoliberal reform in education. Many governments around the world have stepped back or are stepping back from traditional hierarchical control of schools as they look to increase choice, improve quality, enhance equity and encourage innovation. Yet despite this apparent policy orthodoxy (Sahlberg, 2011) governments have also worked to retain authority both by 'steering at a distance' (Hudson, 2007) through meta-governance (Jessop, 2011) and through direct intervention and coercion (Davies, 2013) by remixing combinations of hierarchy, markets and networks to try to achieve their goals. The implication of this for schools and school leaders is a semblance of autonomy and self-governance, but which in practice is frequently experienced as a loss of support coupled with increased pressure to perform against measured targets as student level data is used nationally to hold schools publicly accountable (Ball, 2017).

In this context we show that while one popular interpretation of the SISS agenda is that it requires inter-school partnerships to 'self-organize' their own 'school-led' improvement, our findings demonstrate that this is a partial account that underplays the parallel influences of decentralization, re-regulation and performance management and choice and competition.

Hierarchy

The government argues the SISS policy agenda is premised on 'high autonomy' and 'high accountability' for schools, with a promise to 'trust' the profession, reduce bureaucracy and 'roll back' the state (DfE, 2010; 2016). We find, however, that any increase in operational autonomy for schools is more than balanced out by changes to the accountability framework, which have allowed the state to continue to steer the system from a distance *and* to increasingly intervene and coerce when and where it deems necessary.

Our case study schools reported a constant need to focus on national exam results and to prepare for the possibility of an Ofsted inspection. Many argued that this now demands greater consistency and self-policing. In our survey, more than three-quarters (77 per cent) of school leaders agreed with

the statement 'making sure my school does well in Ofsted inspections is one of my top priorities'. As a result, case study school leaders regularly felt incentivized to prioritize the interests of the school over the interests of particular groups of, usually more vulnerable, children. High levels of stress were widely reported to result from these pressures for compliance and standardization, with a clear sense of a *constrained professionalism* among school staff.

We report mixed views on academization: three-fifths (60 per cent) of survey respondents working in academies agreed that academization had had at least some positive benefits, while two-thirds (69 per cent) of respondents working in maintained schools reported there were no benefits to becoming an academy, especially when weighed against the additional responsibilities. The threat of forced academization had created a sense of fear among many of our case study schools that if their performance were to drop they would be 'taken over' by a MAT, which would impose standardized systems and a narrow curriculum. Some schools were choosing to form or join 'local MATs' to pre-empt external take over.

With academization, powers of school oversight are moving from local to national government. This process has been uneven and often fraught. We identify a series of sharp differences between national and local government over how policy changes should be enacted locally, particularly where LAs have resisted academization. We also highlight differences between different parts of national government around aspects of strategy and attempts to 'implement' policy. The picture that emerges is of *chaotic centralization*, characterized by competing claims to authority and legitimacy but diminishing local knowledge about schools.

Faced with significant funding cuts, a common trend was for LAs to become part of a more *commercial middle tier*, for example by establishing trading arms from which schools could purchase non-statutory services. This was not the only trajectory, however, as all four of our LAs sought to sustain oversight of maintained schools and to retain influence – both by working to reshape school clusters to replace traditional improvement services and by developing new governing networks involving 'system leader' schools, but not always wider stakeholders, in order to co-ordinate school improvement services and support.

As support from LAs has reduced, however, schools have *had* to become more proactive in identifying and addressing their own improvement priorities. A majority of secondary headteachers welcomed what they saw as greater flexibility in where and how they accessed external support. Primary schools were often less enthusiastic and could experience this as a further unwanted burden. In our survey, 'local clusters' of schools were reported as the most common source of external support for schools. This was true for secondary as well as primary schools, although secondaries and especially those with a Requires Improvement (RI) or Inadequate Ofsted grade were also likely to draw on other forms of support, including peer reviews, commercial consultants, NLEs, TSAs, and, to a lesser extent, MATs.

School 'system leaders' – including nationally designated NLEs and TSA leaders as well as academy CEOs – were increasingly at the epicentre of this evolving system, particularly in the secondary phase. They often faced, however, conflicting and unreasonable demands from central government while being perceived by their peers to be an increasingly '*co-opted elite*', working as part of the managerial state and accruing a range of personal and organizational benefits as a result. A range of interviewees, including RSCs and from Ofsted, also expressed concerns about the designated 'system leadership' model, including because of the importance it places on the Ofsted Outstanding grade and because of the influence it can accord to certain charismatic, authoritarian leaders. The 'system leaders' we interviewed all identified benefits from their roles, but also a series of challenges, including significant pressure to make short-term improvement in other schools and the fear that their own school might drop in performance as a result of their external work.

Markets

Building on long-standing quasi-market policies in England, we show how the SISS agenda also contains policies that simultaneously seek to make schools more responsive to parental choice, more diverse and more entrepreneurial.

The majority of headteachers we interviewed perceived that their school faced local pressures to compete for students, staff and/or status, but the extent of competition varied within and between our four localities. One common variation was school phase: in the survey, 91 per cent of secondary school respondents agreed that 'schools in my locality compete with each other to recruit students', whereas among primary schools, only 33 per cent agreed and 48 per cent disagreed.

There was broad recognition that schools are organized by choice and competition into *local status hierarchies*. In the survey, 85 per cent of secondary and 52 per cent of primary school respondents agreed that 'there is a clear local hierarchy of schools in my area, in terms of their status and popularity with parents'. Importantly, school status was rarely seen to be a simple or 'real' reflection of 'school quality', with wider factors such as the school's context, history and student intake all combining to position it relative to others.

The schools we visited were all working more or less overtly to protect their status or to engineer a move up the local hierarchy. Improving a school's Ofsted grade was the most immediate strategy for improving its reputation and position in the local status hierarchy, but we also observed a range of other practices. These ranged from gradual, authentic work to enhance the quality of learning and engage parents, through to aggressive marketing campaigns and 'cream skimming' aimed at recruiting particular types of students.

Our analysis of national Ofsted data for the periods 2005–10 and 2010–15 showed *a relationship between inspection grades and the changing*

socio-economic composition of a school's student body, highlighting the importance of inspection in co-influencing parental choice and in structuring competition. Schools that sustained or improved their judgement to Outstanding in the 2010–15 period saw, on average, a reduction in the percentage of students eligible for free school meals (FSM), while schools retaining or being downgraded to a Requires Improvement and Inadequate judgement saw, on average, an increase in FSM eligibility.

Linked to these findings, there was a consistent view among many of our interviewees that the SISS agenda is furthering the creation of *'winners and losers'*. While higher-status schools were seen to be benefiting in terms of new opportunities and resources as a result of policy reform, the lower-status schools we visited faced a concentration of challenges often including under-subscription, higher mobility and disproportionate numbers of disadvantaged, migrant and hard to place children. Two-thirds (66 per cent) of respondents agreed that inequalities between schools are becoming wider as a result of current government policy.

We also explore the evolution of the market in school improvement services. As sources of 'free' advice and support (for example from the LA) have reduced, knowledge and expertise around aspects of school improvement have become a more important 'commodity' for schools. High-status schools are well placed to compete with LAs and consultants and companies in this new marketplace, but they are responding in different ways. We outline examples of three Outstanding primary schools in one locality that were, respectively, seeking to *sell, protect* and *share* knowledge and expertise. We also show, however, that new local and regional markets in improvement services are particularly incentivizing a focus on the types of knowledge and expertise that can most easily be *codified and commoditized* (as 'best practices') rather than on the joint-practice development and learning processes advocated by Hargreaves (2012) as essential for a SISS.

Networks

Schools in England have collaborated in networks for many years, even while in many cases also competing. Our analysis focuses on inter-organizational partnerships between schools, which we show to have become more extensive and more important to schools since 2010, but we also find that this has created a range of new tensions and inequalities.

The vast majority of schools in our sample reported collaborating with other schools. In the survey, two-thirds (67 per cent) of primary leaders and two-fifths (40 per cent) of secondary leaders stated that their school's strongest partnership was a 'local cluster'. Around one in five secondary schools described their strongest partnership as a TSA (20 per cent) or a MAT (22 per cent) – although we argue below that MATs should not be conceived as partnerships.

The local clusters we visited varied widely in terms of the strength of ties between schools and in the depth and breadth of cluster activity. All four LAs were encouraging their primary schools into 'improvement'-focused

clusters, largely as a way of sustaining some level of monitoring and improvement support in the face of reducing resources and capacity at LA-level. We show, however, that this was often problematic, for example where schools were in competition or where clusters, or schools within them, were unable or unwilling to embrace these new approaches.

Teaching School Alliances (TSAs) were advanced in policy from 2010, with the 'best schools in the country' (DfE, 2010: 23) designated nationally and encouraged to lead new alliances. We exemplify three common development trajectories for the TSAs in our localities, while noting that many alliances adopt hybrid approaches. In *hierarchical alliances*, one or more lead school dominated developments and was seen by alliance members to be benefiting disproportionately. In *exclusive alliances*, a subset of higher performing schools had formed the network as a way of securing their own performance, providing relatively limited opportunities or support for schools more widely to engage. In *marketized alliances*, the lead school/s sold services in a transparent but transactional way, with limited commitment to ongoing partnership or reciprocity with 'client' schools.

In the face of growing DfE pressures on Teaching Schools to secure short-term improvement through 'school-to-school support' and the need to generate income, many Teaching Schools in our sample were forming MATs, as they saw this to offer greater financial security and clearer lines of accountability and authority over other schools.

MATs are commonly referred to as a form of partnership, but we argue that this is inappropriate given a common definition of partnerships as 'legally autonomous organizations that work together' (Provan and Kenis, 2008). By contrast, a MAT is a single legal entity in which individual academies may have delegated powers, but these can be removed by the board. We argue MATs are best understood in terms of *'mergers and acquisitions'*, with prescribed models of governance and leadership largely derived from the private and, to a lesser extent, voluntary sectors. We show how MATs that had originally pursued flatter more lateral organizational models have been encouraged or required by RSCs to adopt more *corporate, bureaucratic and standardized approaches* over time. This was leading to a further dominance by academy sponsors, including higher-status schools, as well as towards increasing fragmentation as MATs compete against each other for status and schools.

MATs have been encouraged to grow or merge by the DfE, in search of efficiencies and 'economies of scale'. However, our statistical analysis of MAT impact on pupil attainment and progress (which we publish in a separate, parallel paper[2]) shows there is *no positive impact from MAT status* for pupils in either primary or secondary academies when compared to pupils in similar standalone academies. We also reveal *important*

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2   Bernardinelli, D., Rutt, S., Greany, T. and Higham, R. (2018) *Multi-academy Trusts: Do they make a difference to pupil outcomes?* This can be downloaded from the publisher's website at www.ucl-ioe-press.com/books/education-policy/hierarchy-markets-and-networks/

differences between MATs of different sizes, suggesting that the economic drive for MAT growth may be in tension with an educational argument for smaller groupings of schools. Pupils in small and mid-sized MATs tend to perform better, on average, than their peers in comparable maintained schools in both phases and, in the primary phase, than comparable standalone academies. Conversely, secondary school pupils in larger MATs (16+ schools) tend to do worse in comparison to both standalone academies and maintained schools.

Conclusion

We conclude that rather than 'moving control to the frontline', the SISS agenda has intensified hierarchical governance and the state's powers of intervention, further constraining the professionalism of school staff and steering the system through a model we term '*coercive autonomy*'. Our findings are unambiguous in illustrating the importance of Ofsted and the wider accountability framework in influencing the behaviour of schools, suggesting that hierarchical governance is more influential than market or network co-ordination in England.

But it is also more complex than that, most obviously because hierarchical governance operates in combination with market mechanisms to create such strong incentives for schools. For example, our analysis of Ofsted results and student composition indicates the co-influence of Ofsted in shaping both parental choice and competitive practices by schools.

Furthermore, the hierarchical state is no command and control monolith. Since 2010 the government has closed or amalgamated many 'quangos', but we find the state is no less 'congested' (Skelcher, 2000). There are now *multiple sub-systems*, with different, partially overlapping organizations in the bureaucratic hierarchy holding diverse views on how the school system should be organized.

This has created new pressures and contradictions for school-level leaders as they try to make sense of and navigate a new emergent landscape. Analysing the ways in which hierarchy, markets and networks intersect to influence decisions and behaviours across different local contexts is thus challenging and depends on a complex array of factors. We show that these include: the history of local relationships between schools and with the local authority, as well as the alliances, consensus and conflicts that have shaped local schooling; the context of individual schools and where and how they are situated socially, economically and geographically; and the agency of local actors, including their capacity to act and how this is informed by their personal and professional values.

We identify two important perspectives on how local systems might be reshaped as a result of these factors. The first sees local agency being fatally diminished in the face of centralization and data surveillance: with a model of 'unbalanced' governance and 'highly centralized system steering' (Ozga, 2009: 149). The second allows more room for local agency, while acknowledging significant centralization: as power moves

away from traditional local democratic structures, space is created for the local to be remade by private, voluntary and existing public sector actors (Lubienski, 2014).

Our research evidences how these moves are increasingly part of the same set of processes. For higher-status schools and their leaders, in particular nationally designated 'system leaders' and those forming MATs, as well as for LAs willing to 'reform' themselves, there are new opportunities to influence and reshape local landscapes, albeit while being bound closer to the performance management of central government. The motivations of these local actors are often mixed and can include aims to support more inclusive and equitable local school systems. At the same time, however, school-level actors are being encouraged to enhance their own positions and the positioning of their school(s), both by working entrepreneurially to sell services in new markets in school improvement and by working in new regional and sub-regional governing networks. These governing networks combine the hierarchical authority of RSCs with the professional networks of an increasingly co-opted elite of school leaders.

In these ways the SISS agenda further develops New Labour's evolution of New Public Management, including by extending the roles and responsibilities of particular school leaders from management to governance and from schools to multi-school groupings. There is no doubt that both networks and new groupings of schools have become more important to schools since 2010, in particular as LA support has been rolled back and as new 'school-led' models of improvement have emerged. However, these do not represent an alternative to hierarchy and markets. They are not 'self-organized' networks (Rhodes, 1997) and rarely represent the 'deep partnerships' promoted by Hargreaves (2012). Rather, they reflect complex local responses to hierarchical and market governance, as schools work together to try to meet accountability requirements and/or to protect their positioning in local status hierarchies.

In this context, while a minority of our respondents were optimistic about the potential for their local school system to become 'self-improving', the majority view was that the SISS agenda is creating a system of 'winners and losers'. Many saw the contemporary policy framework as problematic, not least because of the incentives to act 'selfishly' in a highly regulated marketplace. There was also a prevailing view that the system has become increasingly incoherent. As one secondary school leader interviewee put it: '"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 … 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.'

Individual school leaders were generally positive about their own capacity to interpret and manage external change. For instance, 89 per cent of survey respondents agreed that their school had the capacity it needs to sustain its own improvement over the next three years. However, this did not mean that schools supported current government policy: half

(53 per cent) of our survey respondents reported that they did not support the overall trajectory of current policy, while only 20 per cent did. They were also clear about the tensions, paradoxes and ironies that exist (Greany and Earley, 2017). For example, current reforms were seen to be moving the system away from the original promise of increased school autonomy and towards a model of MATs in which school-level autonomy is reduced. Further, as MATs get larger, the number of managerial levels often increases, meaning that the 'bureaucracy' of the LA is replaced by another, potentially more complex and less accountable bureaucratic form – which develops hierarchical authority without a local democratic mandate.

Active resistance to this ensemble of policies was largely absent in our case study schools, apart from where a school was resisting forced academization. School leaders usually tried to resolve the dilemmas they faced through *'pragmatic compliance'* or sometimes *'passive resistance'*, in which they sought to hold true to a core set of professional values while quietly protecting the school from external change. Such resistance was generally only possible, however, if the school was performing above minimum benchmarks. Furthermore, it often relied to some degree on solidarity between local schools, but if one school started to adopt more self-interested behaviours then others often felt a need to respond or face being disadvantaged in a competitive environment.

We conclude by identifying four themes that emerge from this research that merit further focus and attention among policy makers, researchers and practitioners:

i) *A new economy of knowledge*: in the context of our findings that highlight the incentives for higher-status schools to codify and sell 'best practice' knowledge geared towards the demands of the accountability system, we ask how the system could be reshaped to encourage more inclusive and professional forms of knowledge development and mobilization.

ii) *Fragmentation*: in the context of our findings on Ofsted and student intakes, we ask how changes to the existing model of hierarchical and market governance, including changes to the 'middle tier' above schools, could reduce the trend towards a system of 'winners and losers'.

iii) *Equity*: in the context of our findings on the concentration of vulnerable children in deprived schools, we ask how policy on admissions and fair access could be reformed and how services for the most vulnerable children could be reshaped to redress the trend towards further stratification.

iv) *Legitimacy*: in the context of our findings on an increasing local democratic deficit, we ask how the school system could secure trust among professionals as well as parents and students, and what might be required to create meaningful engagement for these core stakeholders.

Chapter 1

About the research

This report summarizes the findings from a mixed methods research study undertaken between 2014 and 2017 by Professor Toby Greany and Dr Rob Higham at the UCL Institute of Education (IOE). The quantitative strands of the project were undertaken with a team at NfER – Simon Rutt, Daniele Bernardinelli, David Sims and Susan Bamford. Dr Iain Barnes and Dr Melanie Ehren at UCL IOE supported some of the school case study data collection. The project was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and Education Development Trust. The project team were supported by an Advisory Board (see Acknowledgements).

The study analyses how schools in England have interpreted and begun to respond to the government's 'self-improving school-led system' (SISS) policy agenda. This broad policy ensemble (Ball, 1993) has been an overarching government narrative for schools policy since 2010 (House of Commons Education Committee, 2016). Drawing on earlier policy frameworks, the contemporary SISS agenda was introduced by the Conservative-led coalition government in its 2010 white paper *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010), but this has since been extended and developed by the Conservative governments elected in 2015 and 2017. We outline the key features of the SISS policy agenda in Chapter 2.

While aspects of the SISS agenda have been evaluated in isolation, this study provides an empirically based and critical analysis of policy reform and the ways in which this is influencing change across different contexts. The research also seeks to contribute to wider debates on school system governance, reform and leadership, not least by drawing on governance theory to analyse the ways in which hierarchy, markets and networks interact with local contexts and the agency of different actors to reshape local school systems.

The research questions for the project were as follows:

› 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 partnerships 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 school-led approaches and what are the implications for schools and school 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?

The project involved qualitative and quantitative analysis in several strands (see Annex 1 for more details on the methodology):

> › An initial literature review and the development of a theoretical framework.
> › Forty-seven primary and secondary school case studies completed in four localities across England, based on 164 interviews with a range of staff. The four localities were selected based on analysis of national and local data (see Annex 1 for details). Our aim was to select two areas with relatively high and two areas with relatively low proportions of academies and nationally designated 'system leaders', so as to include localities that had engaged differently with these core aspects of the SISS policy agenda.[3] The four localities and schools within them were also selected to represent a range of socio-economic contexts, performance against national metrics and geographic, local authority and school type differences.
> › Interviews with a further 18 system informants – individuals such as regional schools commissioners, Ofsted regional directors and LA leaders who provide a perspective both on developments in the four localities and nationally.
> › A representative national survey of school leaders from 699 schools.
> › Analysis of the impact of primary and secondary multi-academy trusts (MATs) using propensity score matching (the methods and findings from this strand are published in full in a separate, parallel paper, with only the summary findings included in this report for reasons of space[4]).
> › Analysis of Ofsted judgements and student intake characteristics nationally over a ten-year period.

The qualitative research in the four localities was carried out between spring 2015 and autumn 2016. The quantitative strands (national survey, MAT impact analysis and Ofsted analysis) were carried out between autumn 2015 and spring 2017.

This report offers a research perspective on how the SISS agenda is impacting on schools, their students and the local organization of schooling. In order to try to keep this report accessible we set out our summary findings here, with more in-depth analysis and further conceptual work to follow in subsequent publications.

We recognize that in this report we offer only a partial account of the complexity of local areas and responses to change. There are also wider

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3   Throughout this report we refer to Teaching School leaders alongside NLEs and LLEs as 'nationally designated system leaders'. Teaching Schools are designated at an organizational level, so are not defined as 'system leaders' in an individual sense, but we use this terminology for the sake of simplicity. Headteachers of Teaching Schools were also commonly designated as NLEs in our four localities, so there is considerable overlap in practice.

4   This can be downloaded from the publisher's website at www.ucl-ioe-press.com/books/education-policy/hierarchy-markets-and-networks/

limitations to our approach that we acknowledge. For example, we did not collect longitudinal data so have not developed a perspective on change over time and while our research sample includes school leaders, teachers, local authority officers and a range of other middle tier actors, due to time and resources it does not include students or parents. Further, while we provide some insight into classrooms and the work of teachers, our findings – reflecting the SISS policy agenda – concern predominately: relations between schools, LAs and other 'middle tier' actors; the re-structuring of schools as organizations; and the work of school leaders and their positioning(s) in relation to policy. Finally, we visited primary and secondary schools, but not special schools, except one in Northern LA. The decision to exclude special schools was partly driven by resource limitations, but also by the advisory board's view that special schools tend to collaborate and compete with other schools in unique ways, partly depending on the nature of their specialism and context, thus making it difficult to draw out common findings from a relatively small sample.

Chapter 2

Literature review and conceptual framework

Introduction

This chapter describes and analyses the key features of the government's SISS agenda and briefly reviews existing literature in this area. It then sets out the conceptual framework that has informed the research and which provides a structure for this report.

Defining the 'self-improving school-led system'?

The idea of a 'self-improving system' has been widely referenced since 2010, but it is notable that the concept remains largely undefined in official texts (Greany, 2014).[5] Government ministers have referred at different times to both a 'self-improving' and a 'school-led' system. These terms can be traced back before 2010, for example to New Labour initiatives such as the London and City Challenges (Greaves *et al.*, 2014; Rudd *et al.*, 2011) and its efforts to increase school-centred teacher education (McIntyre *et al.*, 2017).

The earliest official reference to a 'self-improving system' (we could find) was made in a Cabinet Office (2006: 1) pamphlet titled: 'The UK Government's Model of Public Service Reform'.[6] This argued that all public services could increase efficiency and quality through a tailored combination of 'elements' that together create: 'a "*self-improving system*" because incentives for continuous improvement and innovation are embedded within it' (p.4, our emphasis). These elements were:

› pressure from government, with top-down performance management through stretching targets, regulation, inspection and direct intervention
› competitive provision, with market incentives to create both competition between 'providers' and contestability over who provides public services

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5 One interpretation of 'self-improving, school-led system' is that it is no more than a rhetorical slogan that has little genuine meaning. In analysing policy documents and Ministerial speeches, however, we argue that the idea of a SISS can be better understood as a narrative that has developed to promote and legitimize an ensemble of contemporary reforms (see page 23). We therefore refer in this report to the SISS as a 'policy agenda', which we understand to mean a set of intended reforms that may be internally inconsistent and even contradictory – including as policy priorities change in response to failures and new opportunities – but that has an overarching desired trajectory, which has implications for the organization of schools and the school system.

6 The pamphlet was produced by the prime minister's strategy unit and was 'not a statement of government policy' but rather a 'working document intended to facilitate discussion and debate' (Cabinet Office, 2006: 2).

› pressure from citizens, with 'users' shaping services though voice and choice (and funding following user choices)
› measures to build the capability and capacity of civil and public servants, through leadership and workforce reform and the promotion of 'best practice' through funding dissemination and incentivizing collaboration.

This outline of a self-improving system continues to inform contemporary policy (Ball, 2017), although since 2010 there has also been a stronger narrative on 'school autonomy'. The New Labour government was critiqued by David Cameron (2011: 2), the then Prime Minister, for running 'centrally controlled public services' and, in its first white paper, the Conservative-led coalition government stated that schools and the teaching profession need to 'feel highly trusted to do what they believe is right' (DfE, 2010: 18).

Our analysis of policy texts since 2010 suggests that government policies that currently constitute the idea of a 'self-improving school-led system' include:

› de-regulation and decentralization – with schools encouraged to become academies to gain independence from local government and new 'freedoms' over finance, staffing, the curriculum and admissions (DfE, 2016b: 8)
› re-regulation and centralization – with new curriculum requirements, central funding contracts, performance indicators and new forms of intervention, including powers for Regional School Commissioners to intervene in academies and schools judged as 'inadequate' or 'coasting'
› choice and competition – with 'much more information about schools available in standardized formats' to increase 'direct accountability' to parental choice and the 'freeing up' of the system to create new types of schools and for private and third-sector providers to sponsor state schools
› adoption of business practices and governance models – with academies encouraged (and sometimes forced) to create or join multi-academy trusts, as these hard-governance structures are argued 'to improve standards and increase financial efficiencies and sustainability' (DfE, 2016b: 8)
› school-led capacity building and knowledge transfer – with centrally designated 'system-leading' schools providing support to other schools, to 'spread best practice' (DfE, 2016: 75) and to allow 'the best schools and leaders to extend their influence' (DfE, 2016: 16).

Across these policies, the government can point to rapid change (DfE, 2017). The number of academies has increased from just over 200 in 2010 to more than 6,700 by October 2017. The number of MATs overseeing two or more schools has also increased, with around 1,000 such MATs overseeing a total of around 5,000 academies by October 2017. The number of 'system-leading' schools has also increased since 2010, with more than 700 Teaching Schools designated and the number of National Leaders of

Education (NLE) up from about 400 in 2010 to more than 1,100 in 2017. Meanwhile, most 'quangos' have been closed or merged into the DfE and central funding for local authorities has been significantly reduced, with overall central funding for LAs reduced by over a quarter between 2009–10 and 2014–15 (IFS, 2015).

Beyond government, proponents of the SISS approach tend to emphasize the interdependence of schools and the importance of inter-organizational networks within a 'self-improving system', rather than school autonomy or choice and competition (Greany, 2014; 2015a; 2016). This has included arguments for collective leadership of local systems by schools (Ainscow, 2015), shared accountability between schools (Gilbert, 2012) and 'a profession-led system that is evidence-informed, innovative and ethical' (Cruddas, 2015: 21). One widely cited contribution was set out by Hargreaves (2010; 2012), who argued that a 'self-improving system' requires local 'co-construction', in which schools share priorities, build trust and devise solutions collegially. For this to occur, Hargreaves argued, schools need to cluster into 'deep and tight' partnerships capable of leading mutual improvement, with staff trained to co-interrogate teaching through shared rounds of evaluation and innovation. The initial direction for these partnerships would be provided by system-leading schools, but over time, Hargreaves (2012: 17) argued, 'everyone in a partnership shares the values and practices of the original system leaders'.

A number of research findings have challenged any simplistic assumptions about the realization of this idealized narrative. These include questions about:

› *school capacity* and whether schools generally, and designated system-leading schools specifically, have the capacity to take on the roles envisaged for them (Chapman, 2013)
› *co-ordination* and whether, given attempts to 'dismantle' the local authority system, there will be sufficient coherence, planning and feedback in a system of academies, MATs and system-leading schools overseen by central government (Gilbert *et al*., 2013)
› *funding* and whether the government will provide sufficient investment to develop the 'school-led' infrastructure of a self-improving system, especially given wider austerity (Greany, 2015b)
› *evidence* and whether the predicted creation and sharing of knowledge about 'effective practice' will occur in practice, especially given historical limitations to scaling up 'best practice' (Brown, 2015)
› *inclusiveness* and whether there will be access to appropriate support in a school-led system, with evidence of cuts in wider services for vulnerable children and disparities in engagement in school-led networks by school size, type, Ofsted grade and regionally (Sandals and Bryant, 2014; Higham and Earley, 2014; Cousin, 2018)
› *involvement* and whether the variety of stakeholders in local education, including teachers and parents, will be allowed to participate and have a representative voice in decisions over the restructuring of local schools systems (Hatcher, 2014; Higham, 2017).

There are also notable variations in the initial enactment of government priorities. For example, about two-thirds of schools – predominately primary schools – remain locally maintained. As the DfE itself notes (DfE, 2017: 20), there are significant differences in Teaching School engagement by geography and socio-economic context with, outside London, 43 per cent of secondary Teaching Schools located in the wealthiest quintile of local areas and only six per cent in the most deprived areas. There is also a range of critical concern about the self-improving system policy agenda – including that inequalities between schools will increase and that the system as a whole will become more fragmented (Greany, 2014; Coldron *et al.*, 2014).

The Government's response to these concerns appears to be that specific 'school-led' policies should be 'implemented' more widely. For example, the former secretary of state, Justine Greening (2017: 5), argued:

> I believe strongly in the school-led system – taking what happens in the very best classrooms and schools in this country and spreading it, driving improvement through collaboration and school-to-school support. But I also recognize that, although this system has flourished in many places, it hasn't yet done so in others. So we need to take a more active, stronger approach where it is most needed … I want to ensure we develop a full national network of teaching schools and prioritize attracting good sponsors and growing MAT capacity in challenging areas, ensuring our best tools for improvement are not just concentrated where they are easiest to establish.

Yet this focus on the idealized potential of MATs and Teaching Schools neglects the wider structures in which schools are embedded. The SISS agenda is simultaneously seeking to reform the quasi-market and the incentives this creates for autonomous schools to act in their own interests, particularly in the absence of a co-ordinating 'middle tier'. There are aims to open up the 'supply side' through new free schools and to create new markets in school improvement services, increasing competitive pressures in the system. Hierarchical control is also central to the SISS agenda, with government targets, inspections and intervention policies serving to further centralize power and expose schools to tightening accountability pressures that further incentivize test performance and institutional self-interest over wider collaboration.

In reality, then, our interpretation of the 'self-improving system' agenda is that it is replete with, and is being layered on top of, existing and contrasting systemic governing structures and incentives for schools. While policy advocates stress the importance of particular types of networks, these co-exist with both hierarchical control and markets, which are often 'airbrushed out of analyses of school networks' (Lumby, 2009: 312). There is a need for research to investigate how these governing structures and, crucially, the responses of schools and other actors to them, may be reconstituting local school systems.

Governing systems: hierarchy, markets and networks

Governance theory provides a useful lens for making sense of the complexity and contradictions that underlie the SISS agenda. Governance theory draws on a range of different theoretical traditions (Bevir, 2011), but we focus here on the ways in which hierarchy, markets and networks operate, both separately and in overlapping and sometimes contradictory ways, to co-ordinate different spheres of social life (Jessop, 2011; Keast *et al.*, 2006; Rhodes, 1997; Thompson *et al.*, 1991).

Each of these co-ordinating mechanisms is seen to have strengths and limitations. For Adler (2001), in idealized form:

> › Hierarchy enables control by using formal authority as a means of co-ordination, but can weaken collaboration and lateral innovation.
> › Markets rely on price to co-ordinate supply and demand and promote flexibility, but can corrode trust and undermine relations that support knowledge sharing and equity.
> › Networks co-ordinate on the basis of trust and promote shared knowledge generation, but can become dysfunctional by allowing complacency or exclusivity on the basis of familiarity.

One popular view is that government policy has shifted over time, moving from hierarchical co-ordination to markets and then to network governance, although the reality is more complex (Exworthy *et al.*, 1999; Cousin, 2018). The post-war period certainly saw a dominance of hierarchical, bureaucratic governance, although this coexisted with strong professional networks. The 1980s saw the introduction of markets and privatization, reflecting the wider rise of neoliberalism (Hood, 1991; Ball, 2011), but these new market mechanisms coexisted with new forms of hierarchical governance as the state became both market maker and regulator, for example through the new National Curriculum, national tests and inspectorate. From the late 1990s, networks were argued to be displacing markets as a dominant mode of co-ordination, reflecting the ICT revolution and globalization (Castells, 1996; Rhodes, 1997). In public services, the need for inter-agency working was emphasized and networks were seen as a response to the fragmentation created by markets, but the new networks did not simply recreate older ones: private and third sector actors took on extensive public sector roles and sector boundaries were blurred in 'public-private partnerships' (Ball, 2007).

These changes led to arguments that the state was being 'hollowed out' (Rhodes, 1997), but more recently it has been seen to be adapting. In a move from 'government to governance' (Kjaer, 2004), hierarchical command and control is being replaced by models that enable steering at a distance (Hudson, 2007). One way to understand this new role of the state is as 'meta-governance' (Jessop, 2011), which sees the state seek overarching authority by setting and adapting the conditions in which governance occurs, including by actively mixing and managing combinations of hierarchy, markets and networks to try to achieve its goals. This perspective can afford the state significant powers, although messiness, *ad hoc*-ery and governance failure remain endemic (Ball, 2011). Furthermore, and critically, the mixing

and overlaying of different governance structures creates tensions that are felt particularly in local contexts (Hoyle and Wallace, 2007). As Newman and Clarke (2009: 127) argue:

> responsibility for managing tensions and dilemmas becomes devolved to individual agents … [and] tend to be experienced as personal, professional or ethical dilemmas.

In these ways, governance theory holds significant implications for how the contemporary SISS policy agenda may re-organize local school systems. Woods and Simkins (2014) argue there is the potential of a range of outcomes including: healthy diversity in response to local need; undesirable fragmentation and threats for equity; and/or national pressure for conformity and prescription. For these reasons, Simkins and Woods argue (2014: 321): 'One of the most pressing questions in a complex and evolving process is what is actually happening at the local level, how is it being reshaped?'

Conceptualizing local school systems

It is clear that local government has been 'relentlessly squeezed' through the changes described above (Woods and Simkins, 2014: 328), but there are different perspectives on how local contexts are being reshaped as a result.

One perspective sees local agency being fatally diminished in the face of centralization. Ozga (2009) argues for instance that the state now depends on rapid flows of data to evaluate and steer schools. Rather than diminish the state's influence, however, this has made schools more visible, allowing the central state a panoptic view, while also amplifying the impact of its performance indicators on professionals work, as these are used as the bases of data collection. In the process, Ozga argues, local authorities have already been substantially weakened, so that the local is no longer either an obstacle to change or a space of democratic agency. Instead local authorities are cast as one 'service agent' among others. The effect, Ozga (2009: 149) argues, is a model of 'unbalanced' governance and 'highly centralized system steering'.

Another perspective allows more room for local agency, while identifying significant centralization. Lubienski (2014) argues that decentralization policies, designed to by-pass middle tier actors, often set up a dual movement locally. Power is moved away from traditional actors and structures that have a local democratic mandate, but opportunities are also created for new actors to occupy and exercise influence in the spaces left behind. These actors are often voluntary, not-for-profit and for-profit organizations (Ball, 2011), but can include older actors willing to 'reform' themselves, including, for example, local authorities willing to become more commercially entrepreneurial (Boyask, 2016). In the process the local is remade, both as a space for specific kinds of agency, and by the state defining entry conditions and regulation – which can also work to bind local actors and institutions 'closer to the will of central government' (Wilkins, 2016: 74).

Research framework

Informed by these perspectives, our research investigates: i) how the SISS policy agenda attempts to govern and re-position different actors, ii) how these different actors interpret and respond to the SISS agenda, to the extent that they do, and iii) how the emerging outcomes impact on different schools, students and the wider local co-ordination of schooling.

To conceptualize these issues we drew on the three regimes of governance outlined above to inform the research design, defining each at a system level as:

› Hierarchy – the formal authority exercised by the state, including through statutory policies and guidance, bureaucracies and performance management and intervention
› Markets – the incentives and (de)regulation aimed at encouraging choice, competition, contestability and commercialization
› Networks – the (re)creation of interdependencies that support and/ or coerce inter-organizational collaboration, partnerships and participation.

Investigating how the SISS agenda has mixed and re-balanced these regimes, we recognize that new policies are often layered onto and interact with a range of 'messy' local and contextual issues, including prior processes of policy enactment (Ball *et al.*, 2012). In order to gain insight into these local differences and to address the research questions, we have focused on whether and how schools and local school systems are being re-shaped, the extent to which these can be considered more or less inclusive, and the influence of the following factors in this process:

i.   the local history of relationships – between schools, the LA and the wider community, as well as the relationships, alliances, consensus and/ or conflicts that have shaped the local provision of schooling

ii. the context of schools – where and how schools are situated and structured, socially and geographically, as well as who they serve

iii. the perceived agency of local actors – reflecting their capacity and freedom to act, as well as their professional beliefs and values (Gewirtz, 2002).

Reporting our findings we structure the report's chapters in relation to our analysis of hierarchy, markets and then networks, while continuing to recognize the interplay between these three regimes of governance and how this influences change in particular contexts. Throughout we use pseudonyms for the four localities, school networks and individual schools to provide anonymity for our respondents. When using quotes we note the respondent's role and, if school based, the school's phase and school type and the school's overall Ofsted grade at the time of the research (including because of the significance of Ofsted grading in our findings).

Chapter 3

Hierarchy: policy, accountability and the changing middle tier

Introduction

In this chapter we draw mainly on our locality research, as well as the survey, to explore the changing ways in which the state's hierarchical authority is being exercised and the local interpretations and responses to this. First, we analyse how the central state, particularly through performance management and a reformed accountability system, has since 2010 further constrained the professionalism of school leaders and teachers, offering a level of 'coercive autonomy' to schools. We then analyse recent reforms to the 'middle tier' that sits above schools, arguing that this has influenced three parallel processes: 'chaotic centralization', the development of a more 'commercialized middle tier' and a 'co-opted elite' of nationally designated school system leaders.

Constrained professionalism

An important claim in the SISS agenda is that schools and the teaching profession should 'feel highly trusted to do what they believe is right' (DfE, 2010: 18). In order to enable this the Government (DfE, 2010: 66) promised that:

> We will dismantle the apparatus of central control and bureaucratic compliance.

In this chapter we argue that schools have not experienced a 'dismantling' of 'central control'. One of the school leaders we interviewed did argue that 'the previous framework (i.e. before 2010 under New Labour) was too prescriptive' and that this 'disempowered people to think independently'. They went on, however, 'now I think you've got the appearance of autonomy … but we're going to measure you in this particular way'. This highlights the central role of the accountability framework – in particular the new National Curriculum and exams and the more demanding Ofsted inspection framework – in influencing school behaviour. One headteacher expressed a widespread view:

> I think in terms of what drives or what motivates people, I think that the accountability framework is the biggest. I don't necessarily agree with that, but it's everything that we're about.
>
> Headteacher, secondary academy, Ofsted Outstanding

Our case study schools highlighted three common ways in which external accountability steers the school system and constrains the professionalism of school staff.

Standardization and pressure to perform
The first concerned how the accountability system generally, and Ofsted inspections in particular, placed *tremendous pressure* on schools and school leaders to secure improvement in relation to externally defined metrics and frameworks. In the survey, the majority of respondents (77 per cent of primary and 83 per cent of secondary schools) agreed or strongly agreed that 'making sure my school does well in Ofsted inspections is one of my top priorities'.

Since 2010 reforms have been made to the Ofsted framework and approach that, while related to the wider guise of reducing bureaucracy, were aimed at making inspection more demanding. One key change introduced as part of the 2012 framework was the shift from judging schools as Satisfactory to Requires Improvement (RI). Schools judged RI receive monitoring visits from Ofsted and a re-inspection within two years. Schools judged 'inadequate' face sponsored academization or, if already an academy, re-brokerage to a new sponsor (DfE, 2016).

As a result, external accountability was seen by our interviewees to have become more punitive since 2010. A related concern was with the consistency now demanded by Ofsted, which combined with a view that the measurement of student outcomes had become more narrow, for example at GCSE as a result of the removal of many vocational qualifications from the approved exams list. Several school leaders used the metaphor of a factory to convey the 'standardized quality control' now expected of them.

With increasing central surveillance of pupil-level data by both the DfE and Ofsted to 'assess risk', there was also a widespread sense of being continually watched (Ozga, 2009). Schools judged to be 'outstanding' have since 2012 been technically 'exempted' from routine inspection but reported needing to be constantly prepared for an inspection. Further, rather than being able to fabricate a positive image of the school for a one-off inspection visit as they might have been able to do in the past (Perryman *et al.*, 2017), school leaders reported needing to be able to show *they* understood where the school would be judged to be failing to meet external standards and to evidence what was being done to rectify this. As one headteacher described, where:

> previously [I] would have done my damnedest to hide every weakness …
> now we know anybody coming in from outside, will find them. We want
> them to be well aware that not only do we know where they are, these
> are the actions we're taking to remedy.
> Principal, secondary convertor academy, Ofsted Outstanding

Self-policing

The second connected theme concerns the ways in which external accountability influences and constrains school leaders' priorities and ways of thinking. This relates to what Perryman (2009) termed 'normalization' – a process of ensuring that behaviour that is externally judged to be effective becomes the only acceptable or 'normal' behaviour in a school.

All of the schools we visited recognized the need to perform for Ofsted and it was notable how language and concepts from Ofsted had been widely internalized into school practices and ways of thinking, particularly at secondary level. For example, in one school's staff appraisal system:

> Everybody has, you all have the same success criteria, which is the Ofsted framework, for what outstanding progress looks like. Yes, and the second one is about your marking through that assessment. Again, we're just taking the [Ofsted] framework. So, that's been successful. And a third one [i.e. staff performance objective] they can develop for themselves.
>
> Headteacher, maintained secondary, Ofsted Good

This was also evident in school self-evaluation, improvement planning and the commissioning of advice and practice inspections ('mocksteds') from consultants. Wherever possible, schools wanted to draw on consultants to support this work who, as one headteacher described it, 'are very up to date with the Ofsted framework for obvious reasons'.

An example of how this 'self-policing' by schools is now being extended is the rapid growth of peer review. More than two-fifths (44 per cent) of the school leaders interviewed in the survey said that their school had received a peer review in the past 12 months and this figure was higher (57 per cent) for leaders in secondary schools with an Ofsted grade 3 (RI) or 4 (Inadequate). Our case study visits indicated that there is no single model for these peer reviews, but most involved a team of heads or senior leaders from partner schools reviewing one or more aspects of a host school's practice and then providing feedback and, sometimes, reciprocal support for improvement. Within this diversity were examples that were closer to 'mocksteds', for example involving an externally commissioned Ofsted inspector alongside the staff from another school and providing an indicative 'Ofsted grade' for the school. Others sought to be more developmental, a way of reviewing and sharing practice in a specified area. Some schools paid for support from one or other of the national organizations that offer frameworks for peer review, but many school partnerships had developed their own approach.

Inviting this peer scrutiny was seen to require 'courage' on the part of heads, since reviews were often 'hard-hitting' and 'painful', with several school leaders conscious of needing to better manage the process as their teachers had initially been 'adversely affected'. Not all school leaders were prepared to engage in this and this could impact on their involvement in school networks, an issue that we return to in Chapter 5. Those that did often valued the feedback and opportunities to review other schools. A minority

argued this provided a space 'outside' the accountability system in which to be honest without fear of reprimand. The majority, however, acknowledged that their focus and methodology reflected the Ofsted model and that they used the reviews as a way to prepare for Ofsted and to evidence and legitimize the need for driving through related changes internally. Indeed, as one headteacher argued, referencing Foucault, in the context of paying a national organization for an annual peer review visit, this was one more way for schools to self-police:

> 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 [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 judgement that I can then use in my Ofsted report, when it comes around.
>
> Principal, secondary convertor academy, Ofsted Outstanding

Narrowing focus and prioritizing the needs of the school
The third related theme concerns the ways in which external accountability can exert pressure on schools to narrow their focus onto student attainment and progress in external tests – including by making decisions that prioritize some children's progress at the expense of others. All the school leaders we interviewed acknowledged the importance of student attainment and progress, and the idea that schools should be responsible for student outcomes was widely accepted. A significant proportion, however, saw league tables and inspections as working against both a broad and balanced curriculum and professional discretion to identify and respond to students' needs and interests.[7]

For example, almost half of the survey respondents (49 per cent) agreed with the statement: 'Ofsted inspections and league tables reduce my school's ability to tailor teaching to our students' needs and interests', while only a third (35 per cent) disagreed. Respondents were also asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: 'External accountability, for example via Ofsted and league tables, has a positive influence on teaching and learning in my school'. Half of respondents (51 per cent) disagreed with this statement, while 31 per cent agreed.

The dominant response to increased external accountability pressure since 2010 has been an increasingly relentless focus on improving externally measured student progress and attainment. This deepened the existing trend towards tracking, monitoring and scrutiny of students and teachers

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7   Our fieldwork was undertaken as student progress data was being introduced as a new additional measure in national performance tables, so it was too early to capture detailed insights into how schools were interpreting and responding to these changes. The inclusion of progress rather than solely raw attainment data was broadly welcome, but there were concerns about progress measures being decontextualized, and in secondary schools about the introduction and constraints of EBacc.

as core tasks of school leadership (Gunter, 2001; Courtney, 2015). The following quote gives a sense of how relentless the focus on improving exam results can be:

> It's amazing what you can achieve – the results if you make it a big deal. And you make things a big deal by focusing on them. Some people probably talk about their results every now and again. Maybe they'll say once a term. I talk about them every two weeks. We sit down and go through every student. Everything that's being put in place, every intervention. What's happening? What can we do more? What can we make sure happens?
>
> <div align="right">Executive head, sponsored secondary academy, Ofsted Good</div>

In a small number of cases our interviewees acknowledged that this 'no-excuses' approach had created an autocratic, perhaps even toxic culture (Craig, 2017). For example, one headteacher described how:

> When I came here as a deputy … it was leadership by 'You do this; you do that'. Very effective, at the time. But the notion was: 'We're now just ratcheting up achievement' and the means of doing that was all of those really effective, rigorous things you can do at the end of the game, at year 11 … But I couldn't see – and it was a shock to me – any kind of learning culture. Among staff, professional development was very tokenistic. Amongst pupils, it wasn't about learning, it was about achieving.
>
> <div align="right">Principal, secondary convertor academy, Ofsted Outstanding</div>

An increased need for schools to 'keep up' with policy change

In the context of such high-stakes accountability, deciding how to interpret and enact policy changes – particularly those that related to performance metrics and indicators – had been a relentless process since 2010 for leaders and teachers in the schools we visited.

The new National Curriculum and the removal of the existing framework of assessment levels, for instance, was accompanied by a requirement that schools develop alternative approaches to 'assessment without levels', which Ofsted would inspect. Many teachers and leaders talked about the stress and disruption caused by this, both as a result of the tight timescales involved and because there was no policy guidance or exemplars for schools to draw on.

More widely, the roll back of local authorities, discussed below, which had previously played a key role in communicating and interpreting new policy for schools, meant that school leaders in particular needed to become even more engaged and adept at scanning for policy-related information and advice. Many schools were paying for information services, such as The Key[8], to try to keep up to date. Schools also relied on local or national networks, including some that they paid to join, such as PiXL, Challenge

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8   See https://schoolleaders.thekeysupport.com/ (accessed 22 June 17).

Partners or Whole Education[9], for information and implementation support. In paying for this support, schools were often trying to both make sense of complex information and understand the new *'rules of the game'* – with expressions such as 'staying ahead of the game' and less commonly 'finding gaming strategies' used by school leaders we interviewed to describe this. We return to the issue of access to these particular types of knowledge in the following chapter, on markets.

Pressure to place the success of the organization first

So we see that while some aspects of bureaucratic prescription have been reduced, this has not been comparable to increases in external accountability and intervention, leading to an increasingly 'constrained professionalism'.

Combined with the operation of markets, which we explore in the next chapter, this creates strong systemic pressures for school leaders to prioritize the *success of the organization* over the needs of particular children. For example, the high stakes nature of accountability coupled with the timing of the annual student census could incentivize schools to make tactical decisions around whether and when to accept new students – in this case asylum seekers:

> When Ofsted comes and I've just taken in five asylum seekers so that my results plummet. It's a horrible way to be talking about children. They're children. It's the situation that we're in. If I take five new children in the last week of year 4, they count on my data. If I take those children on the first week of year 5, they don't.
>
> Headteacher, maintained primary school, Ofsted Good

These decisions and the wider organizing of schools in response to performance targets (Ball, 2003; Perryman *et al.*, 2017) was often critiqued by our case study school leaders, some of whom recognized clearly the ethical challenges it creates for schools:

> As a system, we have gotten so used to thinking that we can just put some numbers on something, and it will happen. And actually, you can do that … you can make the numbers happen by sacrificing your principles along the way, sacrificing ethics.
>
> Principal, secondary convertor academy, Ofsted Outstanding

A minority of leaders in our sample did try consciously to resist the pressure, for instance, to exclude specific children or to narrow the curriculum, although such resistance was never outright and was usually only possible from a position of strength, in that the school was already Good or Outstanding in Ofsted terms. A more common response was compliance – which was widely referred to as 'pragmatism'.

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9   See www.pixl.org.uk, www.challengepartners.org and http://wholeeducation.org
     (accessed 22 June 17).

In this context, a significant minority of school leaders reported that the original purposes for which they came into teaching – to make a difference for children – were being lost as a result of increasing pressures to perform. High levels of professional stress were widely reported and there were questions about the professional status of teachers and school leaders:

> You know education's lost its status professionally to some degree … And I think we've got a battle on our hands to get that back and again. … Where they are seen – and it doesn't help when the government starts announcing, putting a stamp on you; you're outstanding, you're not outstanding. None of that has helped education. None of that has helped learning. None of that has helped the credibility of the value of education and skills. It's diminished it; it's sent us to war with one another.
>
> Headteacher, voluntary aided primary school, Ofsted Outstanding

Coercive autonomy

By contrast, the government argues that by giving academy schools formal independence from LAs, together with new freedoms over finance, staff conditions, the National Curriculum and admissions, this will enable schools to be more locally responsive and 'effective'. The Academies Act, passed in 2010, allowed all schools deemed Good and Outstanding to convert to academy status voluntarily, while schools deemed 'coasting' or Inadequate can be forced to academize under a government-approved sponsor, usually now within a MAT. These legal changes have been accompanied by policy encouragement, including financial incentives, for schools to convert to become academies.

Given the external accountability pressure on schools, we question, however, whether academies can genuinely claim to be autonomous. Rather, we argue that what is on offer is a form of 'coercive autonomy', with schools being 'required to use more discretion and to take more responsibility while also being more closely monitored from above' (Edwards 2000: 154). Previous observers (Simkins, 1997; Higham and Earley, 2014) have identified that School Based Management policies offer schools new *operational* powers, but not new *criteria* power – where criteria power confers the authority to define the aims and purposes of a service, while operational power concerns the authority to decide how the service is to be provided (Winstanley *et al.*, 1995). We argue that academization is an extension of the operational powers offered to schools through Local Management of Schools policies in the late 1980s, but we also show how the hierarchical threat of forced academization, with MATs often delegating less operational power to schools, adds further coercion and fear into the school system.

New operational freedoms

How schools in our study interpreted academy status was often influenced by their context and positioning. For early converters to academy status, financial autonomy from the LA had been an incentive, not least because

schools had gained additional funding. One deputy principal of a primary academy described this as a funding 'handshake' and noted how previously the school's budget was top-sliced for LA services, such as special education needs, which the school did not use as it served a more affluent area. The delegation of this top-slice to academies has contributed to declining funding for LAs although the additional amount received by academies has decreased over time as part of wider cuts (LGIU, 2015).[10]

A second perceived benefit for academies is their ability to deploy resources differently. It was notable, however, that in the majority of academies we visited, senior leaders did not want to change staff terms and conditions, other than by offering additional benefits to retain or recruit staff, particularly in shortage areas.

There was limited evidence in our interviews of any direct benefits for teaching and learning from academization. Some leaders, particularly in primary academies, did note the importance of greater curriculum flexibility in the face of new National Curriculum changes, but most reported that any such freedoms had been cancelled out by the new accountability measures described in the previous section.

These perspectives were broadly corroborated by our survey respondents. Schools that were already academies (n=212, of which 56 primaries, 156 secondaries) were asked about the overall impact that academization had had on their school. The majority (72 per cent) were clear that becoming an academy had made their schools more sharply accountable to government and its agencies. Sixty per cent reported that academy status has had at least some positive effect on their school, with 24 per cent saying it has made no difference, 14 per cent saying it is too early to tell and two per cent saying it has had a negative impact. Over half reported that academy status has enabled the school to form stronger partnerships (57 per cent), improve the curriculum (52 per cent) and improve the quality of school governance (52 per cent). Only around a quarter reported changing their staff's pay and conditions (28 per cent) or their admissions policy (22 per cent).

Forced academization
A second perspective on academization relates to the state's model of mandating structural change where it judges schools to be underperforming. This involves 'forced academization' where a school is required to become a sponsored academy and is usually then run by another school or sponsor within a MAT structure. In our case studies, schools reported that the potential of forced academization had created a widespread sense of fear, not only among schools judged Inadequate and Requires Improvement, but also among those judged Good. Many of our interviewees – particularly primary school leaders – expressed real concern that their school could be

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10 In 2015 the government cut £200m from the central Educational Services Grant (previous LACSEG), which is paid to LAs and academies to fund education support services, with the grant to be cut by 75 per cent from £800m to £200m by 2020.

'taken over' by an academy chain, which one deputy headteacher referred to as 'amalgamations':

> I think amalgamations and academization are the two things educators fear the most. They can cope with another education minister telling teachers off. They can cope with [government] raising the target randomly to some percentage point that we're going to find really difficult to meet. But they do fear academization a lot, and they fear mergers and amalgamations even more.
>
> Deputy headteacher, maintained primary school, Ofsted Good

As we explore in Chapter 5, these fears could lead maintained school leaders and governors to contemplate 'jumping before being pushed', by forming or joining a locally determined MAT and thereby avoiding the threat of forced external sponsorship.

We visited two primary schools in different localities that had both resisted pressure from the DfE to academize, one successfully and one unsuccessfully. These examples highlight the importance of contextual factors, including the extent to which individual leaders are prepared to challenge external pressure. In the first school, which had had a dip in exam results and was judged to be 'satisfactory' at the time, the headteacher and governing body resisted pressure from the DfE to become sponsored 'quite ferociously', despite a lack of support from the LA, 'because I'm quite an experienced headteacher, who's worked in difficult places … I have a pretty good idea of what I'm doing'. The school was inspected by Ofsted and judged to be Good before the DfE could push through the new arrangement, meaning that the school no longer met the criteria for forced sponsorship. Despite this, the headteacher argued that the pressure to perform and the threat that the DfE might return was never far away: 'it's kind of like the birds, vultures circling'. The second school had been judged Inadequate by Ofsted and the previous headteacher had left a year before our visit. A young new headteacher had been appointed, but within days of their arrival the school's governing body resigned *en masse* in protest at the proposed sponsorship arrangement. The new headteacher was also successful in gaining an Ofsted Good judgement in advance of the sponsorship arrangement being formalized, but the DfE-imposed Interim Executive Board, which had replaced the governing body, decided to proceed with the sponsorship arrangement nonetheless.

Academization as a distraction from the core purpose of schools
Another aspect of 'coercive autonomy' relates to a view that there are no benefits of becoming an academy and that, more broadly, the policy was based on a false premise that local authorities were a 'hindrance' to school improvement. This perspective was widespread among maintained schools in our two localities where academization was less prevalent and was particularly strong among primary schools. While the secondary maintained school principals in these areas were generally less positive about the role of

local authorities than the primaries, they did not see any clear benefit from academy status either:

> This is a highly successful school. … I wasn't an academy before; I'm not one now. It makes absolutely no difference.
>
> Headteacher, maintained secondary, Ofsted Outstanding

A small proportion of locally maintained schools had considered academy status but concluded there were insufficient financial benefits for doing so and indeed financial costs in the conversion process. A much larger group of schools argued that the added workload – in terms of finance and administration – was not only unattractive but would actually *distract* them from a core focus on classroom teaching and learning. Some leaders were also opposed to academization in principle and argued for the importance of a local education system and local democratic governance.

These perspectives were broadly corroborated by our survey respondents in locally maintained schools (n=450). Eighty-three per cent reported having no plans to become an academy (87 per cent among primaries, 56 per cent among secondary schools). Two-thirds could not see any benefits from becoming an academy (69 per cent) and did not want to lose the support they were currently receiving from their local authority (62 per cent). Almost half reported that the cost and effort of becoming an academy was too great (50 per cent), that their governing body was opposed in principle to academy status (47 per cent) and that becoming an academy would weaken their local community of schools (45 per cent).

Despite this widespread resistance to academization, however, there was, as we discuss below, a belief among national civil servants that funding cuts to LAs would *coerce* change among primary schools. One RSC interviewee argued, for instance, that:

> Fundamentally it's got to change … we're starting to see a change in that now, and in part that's being driven by some of the realization that what they [primary schools] are dependent on from local authorities is no longer viable in the future. So they're having to look at what else is an opportunity.
>
> Regional Schools Commissioner

Chaotic centralization

The SISS policy agenda has also involved significant and ongoing restructuring of the central and local state. This has involved new processes of centralization, with new powers invested in regional representatives of the state, including those tasked with building a system of academies and MATs. At the same time, local authorities have needed to reshape themselves to meet their statutory duties in the context of substantial budget cuts and declining, but still significant, numbers of maintained schools.

In this section we outline how these changes have created a growing sense of incoherence in the system. There are now multiple sub-systems, with different, partially overlapping 'middle tier' organizations that hold diverse views on how the school system should be organized. This reflects, in part, a system in transition and an incomplete process attempting to shift authority from local to central government. But we argue that central government is also far from coherent or aligned behind a single framework. Indeed, the picture that emerges is one of 'chaotic centralization' – characterized by competing claims to authority and legitimacy but diminishing local knowledge about schools.

Tensions between new regional structures
We observed clear tensions between the various bureaucratic structures that oversee and regulate schools. These structures include: civil servants, such as RSCs and representatives of NCTL[11], who are accountable to ministers; representatives of Ofsted, an independent regulator (non-ministerial department) that reports directly to parliament; and representatives of LAs, who are accountable to their locally elected councillors. We focus initially on the differences between the three national organizations – Ofsted on the one hand, and the RSCs and NCTL representatives on the other.

Under Sir Michael Wilshaw[12], in addition to the new inspection framework introduced in 2012 and substantially revised again in 2015, Ofsted made a number of other changes to its operating model and approach. These included: ending the use of commissioned for-profit inspection providers (following criticisms of inconsistency); the introduction of a new regional office structure; and a move towards actively supporting schools judged to 'Require Improvement' (RI) to improve.

Our civil service respondents were often critical of these changes. One RSC argued that supporting RI schools compromised Ofsted's regulatory role as it could not act as an impartial regulator: 'I think it has to become the regulator, not the school improvement (agency)'. The same RSC also questioned Ofsted's understanding of MATs and argued that it did not have the competence to inspect MATs properly. One of the NCTL regional staff interviewees argued similarly that Ofsted was out of touch with changes in practice and overly driven by the inspection framework:

> I don't think they [Ofsted] always understand a 'school-led system' …
> Does Ofsted understand peer-to-peer review, collaborative working?

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11 After 2010, the government tightened its oversight of several existing educational agencies by turning them into executive agencies. In early 2013 it then merged the former National College for School Leadership and Teacher Development Agency into a single executive agency, named the National College for Teaching and Leadership. In November 2017 the DfE announced that NCTL would be merged into the main department. www.gov.uk/government/news/plans-to-further-boost-teacher-recruitment-and-development

12 Her Majesty's Chief Inspector from 2012 until 2016.

> They probably will argue they do but I'm not sure they do … it only
> judges what it says on the framework.
>
> <div align="right">NCTL Teaching and Leadership Associate</div>

The RSC role was itself established by the Department for Education in September 2014 as a way to manage the growing number of academy schools and MATs, following several high profile failures in terms of school performance and financial mismanagement (Greany and Scott, 2015). Eight RSC posts were created to be responsible for specific 'regions' – although these did not replicate government office or Ofsted regions. Each RSC is advised by a headteacher board comprising a mix of academy principals elected by their peers and co-opted members. The legal powers of RSCs have increased over time and the size and cost of their regional teams has also grown (Hilary *et al.*, 2017).

One RSC described the role as having three main aspects: i) intervention with academies that are underperforming; ii) approving academies converting from local authority-maintained control as well as intervening to force academy sponsorship; and iii) increasing sponsor capacity and developing more multi-academy trusts across the region. The RSC reported that: 'I would say the first one has been two-thirds of my time, and the other two roughly a third in total.' In fact this RSC had intervened in more than 100 academies across the region in their first year in post, with 11 of these being re-brokered from an existing MAT to a different sponsor. This gives a sense of the scale of the task facing the RSCs, with one admitting how difficult the role had been at the outset:

> I'll be honest. My perspective, previously, was that it was chaos in the
> programme. I was shocked, to be honest.
>
> <div align="right">Regional Schools Commissioner</div>

There were also tensions between RSCs and Ofsted in the emerging regional system. One Ofsted interviewee argued, for instance, that the new regional commissioner bureaucracy was giving mixed messages to schools in terms of their quality and performance. A second Ofsted interviewee argued that the new system lacked clear lines of accountability:

> Some of the LA powers have been eroded, and given to academies, but
> what hasn't happened is that the lines of accountability in that system
> haven't been properly established.
>
> <div align="right">Ofsted interviewee</div>

Some headteacher interviewees also raised questions about the transparency of decision-making and about the lack of local accountability in the RSC role. For example, one argued that:

> It [the RSC role] seems to be very unaccountable and very strange. I do think it's quite difficult to see how every school in the country … can report directly to Whitehall in a future system. It seems a bit insane to me.
>
> Headteacher, primary maintained school, Ofsted Outstanding

One of our RSC interviewees acknowledged their lack of local or regional democratic mandate and questioned whether this would remain legitimate in the longer term. Another argued, however, that their role would gain a form of output legitimacy by demonstrating improved school results and that this was more important than any local democratic or input legitimacy.

Tensions between RSCs and LAs

We also encountered frequent tensions between representatives of national and local government. LA officers were keen to maintain a level of coherence in their locality in line with local political priorities and historic approaches. Meanwhile, RSCs in particular were charged with expanding the academy programme and a 'school-led' system in ways that often challenged the LA's perspective.

The relationships between RSCs and LAs were by no means uniform. In two of our localities, where academization rates were above national average, the relationship was fairly cordial. However, in another of our localities, where academization rates had been slower, the RSC described their relationship with the LA as follows:

> They're an LA that has had an anti-academy stance. So, our work [there] has been difficult, and they've not been particularly receptive to our solutions to particular problems.
>
> Regional Schools Commissioner

The RSC expressed frustration at the 'political plays' used by the LA to protect lower performing schools from forced academization. As a result, the RSC argued, the relationship with the LA was fraught: 'It's always a battle … [the LA] have been a barrier to us, as the RSC'. From the LA's perspective, their resistance to the RSC was based on wanting to develop a coherent and inclusive local strategy that would avoid fragmentation. The LA's director was sceptical about a 'school-led' system that relied on the 'moral purpose' of school leaders, some of whom 'get off on the power, the empire building … and it all came crashing down'. The LA Director was also concerned about the fragility of Teaching Schools, both because of their funding model and because they could be de-designated. There was a need, therefore, the LA director argued, for:

> The local authority having a strong leadership role, as a convener, as a broker, as a commissioner, as a partner, because actually, when things fall, someone's got to catch it. … that's the bit that I'm trying to safeguard.
>
> Local authority interviewee

Relations between the LA and RSC had reached an impasse and the RSC had decided to 'back off' from that particular LA and to focus their work on areas that were 'more receptive'. Over the long term, as we noted above, the RSCs were quietly confident that continued funding cuts would 'force pragmatism' on both LAs and maintained primary schools, meaning that they would have to engage with the academy model at some point. In this view, MATs, TSAs, dioceses and private providers would populate a new middle tier co-ordinated by RSCs at a regional and 'sub-regional' level, with LAs relegated to helping 'guide some of the decision making'. This aspiration for the future was not necessarily supported by one of our Ofsted interviewees, however, who noted that 'some of the LAs that are proving to be more effective … are those who have probably retained some core function around school improvement … [whereas in LAs] where basically, everything's outsourced, it's interesting the number of schools that are challenged there around performance'.

Commercialized middle tier

The SISS agenda is clearly forcing LAs to reshape their role in relation to school oversight, in particular through academization and wider central cuts to core LA budgets (IFS, 2015). Instead, LAs have been encouraged by the government to develop a rather nebulous new role, termed 'champion for children' that means advocating for parents, families and children (Department for Education, 2010). Meanwhile, though, LAs retain a number of statutory duties for children and young people, including ensuring there is fair access to schooling, support for vulnerable children and high standards in schools (Parish *et al.*, 2012; Boyask, 2015).

In this section we review the reorganization of the LAs in each of our four localities. All four LAs have had to rationalize their services to schools, although they have all sought to retain strategic influence over local academies and some level of service delivery for their remaining maintained schools. We show how the interpretations and actions of LAs have varied, reflecting in part the local history of relationships, alliances and conflicts between schools and the local authority. We also identify, however, an emerging trend away from traditional local hierarchical governance and towards *commercialized network governance*. This is not the only response among our four LAs, but it appears to be an increasingly common direction of travel that contains two related dimensions. On the one hand, LAs are creating new commercial structures for their traded services in order to sell services to schools both locally and sometimes beyond the locality. At the same time, LAs are working to develop new local governing networks, for example through 'strategic school improvement boards', as they seek to influence and share resources with the new school-led groupings of schools, such as MATs and TSAs. These findings provide some support for recent research and work that has emphasized the potential for LAs to work with schools in order to shape coherent local governance and support arrangements (ISOS Partnership/LGA, 2018; Gilbert, 2018), although our analysis highlights the tensions inherent in these developments, including in

terms of who is actually involved in these new processes of decision-making (Hatcher, 2014).

Reorganizing LA support for schools
Our four case study LAs had all embarked on major reorganizations since 2010. Two of the four – Eastern and Northern LAs – had made rapid changes. Both had witnessed a majority of secondary schools become convertor academies after 2010 and both had an above national average number of Teaching Schools and other nationally designated 'system leaders', as a proportion of local schools.

Eastern LA had developed an 'internal trading unit' that was designed to trade the LA's services for schools through annual service level agreements, which incorporated statutory and de-delegated provision as well as buying services and additional 'consultancy'. The unit had been encouraged to be entrepreneurial and had begun to trade its services into neighbouring LAs, from which it made a small financial surplus that was reported to be reinvested in the LA's improvement service. Separate to the unit, the LA retained a small school improvement team that monitored maintained schools and contracted school support from both the trading unit and TSAs and other local schools. To organize this work, and to try to co-ordinate a mixed maintained school and academy system, the LA had established a 'strategic partnership' that aimed to agree a locality-wide strategy for schools, including improving student attainment and inclusion, teacher recruitment and place planning. The partnership comprised local leaders of TSAs, MATs and diocesan representatives, the chairs of the primary and secondary headteachers' associations and local business representatives. The terms of membership allowed only 'Good' or 'Outstanding' schools to join the partnership, thereby excluding the direct involvement of about one-fifth of schools judged by Ofsted to be most in need of external support.

Leaders of the secondary schools we visited in the locality, which were all academies and had not been committed to the LA historically, were largely supportive of these developments. They reported that the LA had appointed 'credible' senior staff who had been able to broker solutions to complex shared challenges, such as the high rates of permanent exclusions. There were several concerns, however. First, one LA officer questioned how coherent the new model could be in the face of continuing fragmentation: 'we keep trying to act as the umbrella and glue and if we didn't do that then it would just be, you know, chaos and war and stuff'. Second, a majority of our primary school interviewees argued that the quality of local improvement support had declined since 2010. For example, for one primary TSA head, not only was the depletion of the LA 'dreadfully, dreadfully sad', there was also a lack of capacity among local TSAs to 'replace' the LA team:

> The LA still goes into those ['failing'] schools and works with the heads to draw up a plan and then they come to the TSA and say, 'Have you got somebody who could do some work on phonics in reception?'…

> And that's good and I think it's good to draw on people doing the job, but it's much more limited in my view. And I think we've found already, we haven't got the capacity for half of the work that's needed in [the locality] at the moment.
>
> Headteacher, maintained primary, Ofsted Outstanding

Northern LA was reported by one headteacher to have 'foreseen its own demise' and, from 2010, had encouraged and helped schools in the locality to establish an 'Educational Partnership' (EP). After an initial start-up grant from the LA, the EP was core funded by an annual subscription from member schools, although it also increasingly raised income by trading services beyond the locality. The EP was governed by headteachers elected from subscribing schools, two school governor representatives and a co-opted LA officer. It was led by a seconded LA officer who managed a small team of school improvement advisors. Schools could choose whether or not to buy-in to the EP, but all primary schools in the LA and a majority of secondary schools did so at the time of our visit. Member schools received support from a dedicated EP advisor, in-depth support to prepare for and undergo an Ofsted inspection and reduced fees to attend the EP's CPD programme, which was run by external consultants and schools accredited by the EP for their expertise in particular areas. Alongside the EP, the LA had retained a small core school team that contracted statutory and de-delegated services as well as specific improvement support for identified schools from the EP.

School interviewees had a range of opinions on the impact of the EP. Many, particularly primary schools, valued the EP's services and the continuity this offered from historic LA provision. There were a range of concerns, however. These included: that the existence of the EP had constrained the development of local, spontaneous school networks, particularly at primary level; that the EP staff were sometimes guilty of favouritism towards particular schools and tried to control member primary schools; and that the EP's focus on Ofsted was too narrow and lacked support for wider pedagogy. Secondary schools, the majority of which had become academies, had created their own school improvement partnership (STAR), which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

The LAs in our two other localities – Southern and Western LAs – where rates of academization were lower, had made less rapid changes and had sought to retain more of their pre-existing structures and approaches to school monitoring and support, at least at primary level where a significant proportion of primary leaders remained committed to the concept of an LA family and approach. Both LAs had weaker and sometimes fractious relations with their secondary schools and academies, who sometimes characterized the LA as 'paternalistic', 'slow and bureaucratic' and 'lacking in challenge'. There had been less of a shift towards trading services and network governance, but there was increasing realization that this might occur – with both LAs working to re-engineer local school clusters as a way to rationalize their support for schools. Western LA had reduced the

number of employed school improvement advisors on its central team and was contracting serving school leaders to provide monitoring and support to other primary schools. It was also working to create a 'strategic improvement board' comprising TSAs and other 'leading schools' as well as the RSC as a way to oversee and help co-ordinate its work and support for schools, but which did not include representatives of schools judged by Ofsted to be most in need of external support.

Southern LA had sought to retain a schools team that organized and took responsibility for system co-ordination and school support and intervention. To do this in the context of substantial cuts, including those already made to the number of LA School Improvement Officers (SIOs), the LA had strongly encouraged and helped schools to reorganize local clusters, so that an SIO could work with each cluster rather than every school, freeing up SIO time to focus on 'schools causing concern'. The LA had also provided start-up funds for a company limited by guarantee (CLG) that organized local CPD provision for schools. The company was now independent of the LA and funded by annual school subscriptions. While primary schools were often positive about Southern LA they all reported its capacity was declining and that LA SIOs were good but increasingly had a 'massive' workload. One clear concern was that the strength and depth of ties in local primary school clusters varied considerably, and we explore the consequences of this in Chapter 5. The secondary schools had formed a single network, which the LA has now joined as an associate partner, paying an annual membership subscription, and again we explore this development in Chapter 5.

A second common concern was the level of challenge facing more deprived schools as LA services to support vulnerable children were being cut back. These cuts were to specialist educational support services, such as education psychologists, speech and language, behaviour and attendance and CAMHS, where school leaders reported long waits and too few staff, including when they were attempting to buy in these services. These concerns were seen to be particularly severe in the most deprived LA following substantial recent in-migration, with the LA needing to place increasing numbers of vulnerable children, such as refugees, and with higher-status schools often unwilling to accept them, as we explore in Chapter 4. In our survey, just under half (48 per cent) of respondents agreed that provision for the most vulnerable children in their locality had deteriorated over the last three years.

Where do schools turn for support?

In the context of these different local changes, there was no simple or single interpretation of where schools were turning for external support. Secondary schools were more likely to co-ordinate their own improvement support and professional learning for staff – both by working collaboratively with and/or by buying services from schools as well as consultants, companies and indeed the LA. A majority of secondary schools were positive about this model, which appeared to represent the core of what a 'self-improving,

school-led system' meant for them. Some were also highly critical of their LA's historic provision:

> I think the old system of local authority advisors was just of no use at all … I think it's far better … that we can go to the schools that we want to go to, that we trust, where we know the value's going to be better.
>
> <div align="right">Headteacher, secondary academy, Ofsted Good</div>

This was not the only view, however, with less well-positioned secondary schools more likely to be cautious about a 'get on with it yourself' mentality. For example, one headteacher argued:

> It isn't what it was, in terms of somebody on the end of the phone who's available to come in and talk to you about your literacy policy [for example] before it goes to governance. You don't have that any more; it's 'Get on with it yourself', or if somebody in another school has a policy, they might send it to you. But they don't have time to come to you and sit down and explain what it all looks like. It just makes things more frantic.
>
> <div align="right">Headteacher, maintained secondary, Ofsted Good</div>

These views were echoed among our primary school interviewees, but with notably different levels of emphasis. The concept of schools collaborating and of teachers engaging with, as one deputy head described, other 'practising teachers who can model some of their teaching strategies and pedagogies … and show other schools … what this would look like in the classroom' was widely welcomed. At the same time, in contrast with a common secondary view, the majority of primary interviewees remained firmly committed to maintaining a coherent local system of support for schools and to an ongoing role for the LA in overseeing and co-ordinating this. Some expressed concern that the emerging model was difficult to navigate, with no means of judging quality when selecting between different TSAs, NLEs and the other commercial provision available. As the following quote from the head of a very small primary school highlights, small primary schools remained particularly reliant on the LA for support due to their limited capacity:

> The LA is just crucial. We couldn't manage financially without their help and support … we can't run the IT without buying in external support … The SEN, the behaviour support – if we do have specific problems, as they come up, because we don't have it a lot, we don't build up the skills base within school and retain it.
>
> <div align="right">Headteacher, maintained primary school, Ofsted Good</div>

These school phase differences were also apparent in our survey. Nearly half of primary school respondents (46 per cent) reported that the external support available to their school was *better* three years ago than it was now, while just 28 per cent agreed that it was better now. Among secondary

schools this view was almost exactly reversed, with 41 per cent reporting that external support was *better now* than three years ago, and 25 per cent reporting it was better before.

We also asked school leaders about the sources of external support their school had drawn on in the past year. The LA remains a regular source of external advice and support, particularly for primary schools (78 per cent) but also for more than half of secondaries (58 per cent). Overall, the most common form of external support was reported to be a local cluster of schools (88 per cent overall: primary – 94 per cent; secondary – 75 per cent), which we discuss further in Chapter 5. Unsurprisingly, Ofsted Grade 3 and 4 (RI and Inadequate) schools were more likely to draw on a wider range of support, including from the LA and Ofsted/HMI visits. Secondary schools with an RI or Inadequate Ofsted grade were also more likely to draw on new forms of external support from NLEs/LLEs (55 per cent), TSAs (48 per cent) and MATs (31 per cent). This was significantly different from primary schools, of which only 20 per cent drew on TSAs for support, 35 per cent on NLEs/LLEs and eight per cent on MATs.

School system leaders – a co-opted elite?

School 'system leaders', such as NLEs and Teaching Schools as well as academy sponsors, were increasingly at the epicentre of the evolving system described above, particularly in the secondary phase. In this section we argue that, while there is substantial local variation, 'system leaders' are increasingly being co-opted to work towards the national vision of reform, supporting hierarchical governance as a local or sub-regional 'managerial elite' (Hatcher, 2008: 30).

System leadership: a problematic concept

Our interviews with representatives of local and national government regularly highlighted how they saw designated school 'system leaders' as an important resource for enacting their particular agenda. This was an important further dimension of the local–national tensions we described above. School 'system leaders' were seen by a variety of government actors to have the potential of modelling behaviours and/or developed structures, such as TSAs and MATs, that could influence the actions of schools more widely. In a tight funding environment, 'system leaders' were also seen to represent or have authority over scarce 'capacity' that could be directed or commissioned to support under-performing schools. One of our RSC interviewees reported, for instance, that:

> I've spent quite a lot of time courting Teaching Schools, because one of the things that I don't have is access to any kind of school improvement … I need to go and commission school improvement.
>
> Regional School Commissioner

There was also significant concern, however, expressed by other school leaders and LA officials as well as RSCs about 'system leadership' – both in terms of how this was conceived in the SISS policy agenda and in the

ways in which particular charismatic individuals were undertaking 'system leader' roles.

Among other school leaders there was concern that nationally designated 'system leadership' was contributing to an increasingly imbalanced system. While, as we explore in Chapter 5, a wide range of school staff were working with and offering reciprocal support to staff in other schools, a national network of 'system leaders' was seen to be an increasingly separate, elite grouping:

> There's a trade in MBEs and 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 ... and there's an awful lot that can channel into these great schools, and the funding goes there and the resources go there, the students go there and the NQTs (Newly Qualified Teachers) go there. ... There is a danger that you can just pick up a copy of *Animal Farm* to see where it will go. That's the thing that worries me the most.
>
> Principal, secondary convertor academy, Ofsted Outstanding

Another common concern was around the importance that national 'system leadership' designations attach to the Ofsted Outstanding grade, reflecting a widespread view that being judged Outstanding does not mean that an individual or school is well equipped to support other schools or contribute to the development of the wider system, either in temperamental or practical terms. This was seen to reflect a policy focus on identifying the 'best schools' (DfE 2016: 16) and 'spreading best practice' (DfE 2016: 75) rather than on developing local solutions and networks of joint practice development (which we discuss in Chapter 5). Notably, some of our RSC interviewees also expressed concerns about such policy use of the 'Outstanding' grade – with one RSC arguing that one route to Outstanding was by 'pulling up a drawbridge' and focusing internally, but:

> that doesn't necessarily mean you know how to go help another school get out of special measures ... There are so many benefits of being called an Outstanding school, in terms of what opportunities are opened up to you ... there's an assumption that you can do everything. And that clearly can't be right.
>
> RSC interviewee

Our RSCs also highlighted worries over the ways in which certain designated 'system leaders' behaved, which was connected to a particular, 'charismatic autocratic' leadership style, or as one RSC put it: 'they will do it in their way or no way'. At the same time RSCs also criticized the managerial 'competence' of some Teaching Schools – with one arguing their impact was 'a bit mixed' and only about a third were 'really credible' in terms of providing school-to-school support in their view.

These issues clearly reflect the wider tensions in 'system leadership'. On the one hand, 'system leaders' are encouraged and expected by government to drive relentless and rapid improvement across multiple schools. Many are working at the same time to address other 'school-led' policy priorities, such as to expand the numbers of trainees on school-led Initial Teacher Training routes. Meanwhile, to differing degrees, they are charged with working on behalf of an idealized 'self-improving' system, engaging their peers in building collaborative alliances and 'deep partnerships', even while operating in a competitive marketplace for school improvement services.

The 'system leaders' we interviewed recognized these tensions. Most were not obvious members of the national network of power brokers described above. More commonly, they were headteachers who felt that they had 'put their head above the parapet' and were now sometimes questioning why they had done so. They did generally, however, see clear benefits to their own schools from providing school-to-school support or leading new 'alliances', for example because this provided new opportunities for developing and retaining their own staff and recruiting new staff. Other motivations included: professional development; wanting to enhance the attractiveness of their school to parents; financial benefits; and a view that supporting other schools and ensuring that every child gets a good education reflects the moral purpose of leadership (although some were cautious about making simplistic claims given the complexity of incentives involved). Another motivation concerned their own sense of personal value and confidence as a leader: as one head commented, 'a little part of me is quite flattered when I'm asked to do it. It provides me with a feedback loop that I'm doing alright.'

At the same time this was 'greedy' (Gronn, 2002) and sometimes almost impossible work, and 'system leader' interviewees identified a range of challenges. External pressure to secure improvement in other schools combined with a concern that if school staff focused too much time and effort on supporting the wider system, the school might suffer and its results drop, which could mean their designation would be removed. This linked to concerns over the difficulty of gaining and managing funding for such work, which could come in unpredictable bursts from central government, making it hard to plan for staffing and activity. There was also a view that school 'system leaders' were being asked to provide school improvement 'on the cheap'.

To gain funding and other policy-related opportunities, system leaders needed to engage with the bureaucracy of national government agencies, which many found frustrating. They often found it difficult to navigate the respective roles and politics of RSCs and NCTL as well as LAs. However, this was seen to be crucial work because, as one NCTL interviewee noted – in explaining the commissioning process – 'who you know' within these governing networks was important:

> the Regional Schools Commissioners might have contacted us and said look, you know, there are two academies in your patch that we're really

worried about, can you find us somebody to support them. And then what I would have done was looked down my list of National Leaders, of Teaching Schools, and contacted them. And I have to be honest that to some extent those that you know best are the ones that you contact.

<div align="right">NCTL interviewee</div>

Accountability was also a concern for many of the 'system leaders' we interviewed, who argued that they were being asked to play a leadership role across their locality, but they were not always clear on what they were actually responsible for or how far their authority stretched, for example if the supported school was not open to their suggestions. One increasingly common answer to these challenges was for 'system leaders' to establish MATs, as they saw this to offer a level of secure income and clearer lines of accountability and *authority* over other schools. As we discuss in Chapter 5, MATs have also become the government's preferred structure for the system, so there have been financial and other forms of encouragement for 'system leaders' to develop them[13].

So we see that the notion of school 'system leadership' is problematic. Some 'system leaders' were responding to the tensions involved by developing entrepreneurial, commercial activities (see Chapter 4). At the same time, a substantial proportion of 'system leaders' were being co-opted as a managerial elite to work as part of the 'central machinery of government' (Hatcher, 2008; Gu *et al*., 2016; Cousin, 2018). There were gradations to this: our respondents ranged between those operating in national or sub-regional elites and those who claimed to be providing local solutions to 'help' schools avoid imposed national MATs. However, even this latter group could be seen to be working more or less overtly towards a national agenda of change characterized by academization and executive leadership across groups of schools. This work came with significant new pressures, but also new resources, prestige and authority.

Conclusion

This chapter argued that the SISS policy agenda is premised on 'high autonomy' and 'high accountability' for schools, with a promise to 'trust' the profession, reduce bureaucracy and 'roll back' the state. However, we found that any increase in operational power available to academies has not been comparable to the changes to the accountability framework, which have allowed the state to continue to steer the system from a distance and to increasingly intervene and coerce when and where it deems necessary.

We highlight commonalities as well as differences within and between our four localities and between primary and secondary schools as they have begun to interpret these policy changes. These differences are certainly influenced by the contextual factors we outlined in Chapter 1, including the

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13 For example, DfE funding was made available through the Regional Academy Growth Fund www.gov.uk/government/publications/regional-academy-growth-fund-award-recipients (accessed 14 January 2018).

history of local relationships, the context of schools and the agency of local leaders, but there were also wider factors at play. For example, Northern LA was seen to have 'foreseen its own demise' and worked to establish an Education Partnership, an approach that reflected and responded to existing levels of academization and nationally designated 'system leadership' in the locality. But Northern was also the least deprived of the four localities we studied and had the highest performing schools overall, so it arguably had more room for manoeuvre as it responded to policy change. By contrast, the other LA with high densities of academies and 'system leaders', Eastern, was more deprived and its schools were historically lower performing, meaning that it had higher proportions of sponsored academies and MATs and the LA was seeking to work more reactively to engage these academies in a collective dialogue while also supporting its remaining maintained schools.

As a result of these differences it remains difficult to generalize about how schools and local systems are responding and adapting to the policy changes we describe. One overall observation is that while the school leaders we interviewed were frequently critical of policy changes, in practice they appeared relatively powerless to actively resist the influence of high stakes accountability. In the survey, just over half (53 per cent) of all leaders reported that they did not support the overall trajectory of current education policy, while only 20 per cent reported that they did. Two-thirds (69 per cent) agreed that they are usually able to adapt government policy to fit their school's aims and values, but in our case study schools such adaptation was often cast in terms of how and when to comply.

We did observe isolated examples of active resistance by schools, for example the experienced primary school head who had resisted forced academization that we described above. We also observed examples of what might be called 'passive resistance': schools that were trying to hold true to a core set of professional values and beliefs about education in the face of external change, as this quote from a secondary head reflects:

> We try quite hard to be a good 'bog standard' comprehensive school, almost deliberately, actually deliberately. … It's a conscious decision to carry on doing what we do and focus on what we do and help some other people locally in our own way, without the interference of other people from outside of that.
>
> Headteacher, secondary maintained school, Ofsted Good

While these acts of 'passive resistance' were possible as long as the school continued to perform above minimum benchmarks, it was clear that resisting external change in this way required bravery and an easier path was to adapt the school's aims and values to fit the policy environment. Deciding when and how to adapt in these ways, and how to balance the needs of the school with the wider needs of children and policy, lay at the heart of the personal, professional and ethical dilemmas that many of the respondents reported.

Chapter 4

Markets: local markets and a new knowledge economy for schools

Introduction

All the schools in our case study sample were aware of the formal quasi-market in which they worked and the majority of heads perceived that their school faced local pressures to compete for students, staff or status.[14] It was not uncommon for heads to initially downplay local competition, before going on to describe how market incentives influenced their behaviour and practice. One primary head described how: 'at the end of the day, children are money … you want parents to like your school'. Another primary head noted how: 'Everybody knows the game … you're not too noisy about it, but you try and make sure you have your events in the paper … there's that sort of competition. It gives us an incentive to make sure that we're doing things that stand out.'

In this chapter, we draw primarily on the case study research, but also the survey and the analysis of Ofsted data, to analyse the local quasi-markets in which schools are situated, the competitive incentives and pressures they face and the responses they are developing. We conclude by exploring the ways in which particular 'knowledge' has become a more valuable and commoditized resource for schools. We explore the different ways in which three high-status primary schools are responding, by protecting, selling or sharing their knowledge.

Local markets

The extent of competition experienced by schools varied within and between localities. As Woods *et al*. (1998) identified, while the formal properties of the quasi-market as set out in policy are important, it is the actions of schools within 'local competitive arenas' that establish local cultures of competition. In these terms, each of our four localities could be understood to contain multiple overlapping competitive arenas, with variations in levels of competition within and between these.

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14 We use the commonly referred-to term 'quasi-market' here to recognize that the formal market mechanisms introduced into the state school system under the 1988 Educational Reform Act differed in a number of ways from 'conventional' private-sector markets (Le Grand, 1991). The 1988 Act introduced open enrolment, per-capita funding and decentralized budgets with the intention that schools would become more responsive to parental preferences and be strongly incentivized to do so through competition for students. However, in contrast to private-sector markets: supply and demand were not to be coordinated through a price mechanism (Tooley, 1995: 22); schools were not allowed to make a direct profit (Le Grand, 1991: 1260); and there was no free entry for 'new providers' (Glennerster, 1991: 1268).

One common variation was between primary and secondary schools. In part this reflected recent demographic growth among primary school age children, with the majority of primary schools reporting increased intakes and reduced viability pressures. By comparison, secondary schools were more likely to report a current over-supply of places locally. The dynamics of local secondary school markets were also important. Secondary students were reported to be more likely to travel to school independently and their parents to be less reliant on neighbourhood schools. In part as a result, secondary schools were seen to be more willing to act as independent organizations with the financial and managerial capacity to engage in marketing. These school phase differences were reflected in our survey. Among secondary schools, 91 per cent of headteachers (tended to or strongly) agreed that 'schools in my locality compete with each other to recruit students'. Among primary schools, only 33 per cent agreed and 48 per cent disagreed with this statement.

There was less obvious variation between schools located in rural and non-rural areas, with little difference reported here by our survey respondents. However, in one of the four localities – Western – there was clear rural/urban variation, with rural schools reporting that distance and travel times reduced, but by no means eliminated, competitive pressure. In another locality, however, competition between rural primary schools was reported to be increasing.

It was also the case that neighbouring schools could, in practice, be part of different, partially overlapping, sub-markets. Taylor (2001) argued that 'parallel markets' can exist where, for instance, neighbouring private, selective and/or faith schools recruit across different socio-spatial catchments. In our localities, faith schools were often reported to recruit across a wider radius than other schools, creating a partially parallel market, although this did not insulate faith schools from competitive pressures, either between each other or with other, non-faith, schools.

Local status hierarchies

While the intensity of competition depended on context and the interactions between local schools, a clear commonality was the reproduction of local status hierarchies. The majority of schools in all four localities reported the existence of a status hierarchy among schools locally. This was reflected in our survey findings, with 85 per cent of secondary and 52 per cent of primary school respondents agreeing that 'there is a clear local hierarchy of schools in my area, in terms of their status and popularity with parents'.

Importantly, a school's positioning in a local status hierarchy was rarely seen by schools to be a simple reflection of 'school quality'. Schools perceived that local status hierarchies were created and reproduced in relation to a range of criteria. These included:

› school context – where the school was located and its perceived history
› student composition – the socio-economic status of potential peers, their ethnicity and home language
› student attainment and progress – particularly the government's headline indicators

› Ofsted judgement – particularly the most recent overall inspection grade
› educational 'offer' – how academic and extra-curricular activities are used to differentiate a school and appeal to particular groups of parents.

These criteria combined over time to position a school relative to other local schools. Once gained, a positioning could be hard to change. One secondary headteacher in a rural area reported, for instance, how a 20-year-old history of the school and the composition of the student body continued to influence the school:

> Reputation lasts a long time around here. A lot of parents of our kids or parents of kids in this area went to this school, and it used to be, 20 years ago, a really rough school, like seriously rough school … Those people tend to want to send their children, especially their daughters interestingly, to [a competitor school] because that's a 'nice' school. We still have to fight that back all the time.
>
> Headteacher, secondary maintained, Ofsted Good

The role of Ofsted grades in influencing local status hierarchies

A school's Ofsted grading was seen widely to influence the status of a school. This offered a means for hierarchical moves, as a drop or increase in Ofsted grade could impact on local patterns of choice. One secondary headteacher reported how a group of parents had organized to bus their children to his school after their existing school had been downgraded two levels by Ofsted. A primary headteacher differentiated between attracting potential new parents and retaining existing parents after being downgraded to Requires Improvement:

> In terms of our parental body, they did have questions. 'Why had we gone from being Good to RI?'… We haven't lost anyone from within the body. I think we struggled a bit to attract parents. That has probably damaged us more, people who don't know us.
>
> Headteacher, sponsored primary academy, Ofsted RI

But the impact of Ofsted was not always clear-cut. In the context of an over-supply of places, for example, one Ofsted Good school we visited had remained over-subscribed and attractive to middle-class parents despite another local school achieving an 'Outstanding' judgement. Similarly, a distinctive ethos and 'brand' were seen as important differentiators for a minority of schools: for example, the head of a primary school judged Good by Ofsted stated that the school was oversubscribed because it was 'selling' an alternative, Steiner-like education, which was particularly valued by some local parents.

School positioning and context influence how competition is experienced by schools

Positioning in a local hierarchy was certainly seen by our case study schools to affect a school's ability to influence local patterns of parental choice. Being

towards the top of the local hierarchy, for instance, often meant being over-subscribed, which afforded greater financial certainty and more influence over who attended the school through more or less overt 'cream-skimming' (including over mid-year entry and hard to place students). The context-specific nature of markets meant this could be expressed in different ways, as illustrated by two primaries in the same locality.

The first school was judged to be 'Good' and had a reputation as a good local community school. It was located in an area of high deprivation with a relatively flat local hierarchy, in which local schools admitted broadly similar intakes. The headteacher argued that there was competition locally, but that the school was full and so did not experience this competition as acute. The school did market itself locally, including through a website and school prospectus, but the headteacher argued that word of mouth and having a nursery were more important. In part this reflected local factors as, often, 'parents want their children to be in the nearest school, regardless of provision.'

By comparison, the second school was very aware of competitive pressure. Judged also to be 'Good', the school was located in a suburb with low overall levels of deprivation, but a steeper local hierarchy with schools admitting dissimilar intakes. The headteacher identified two 'main competitors' and was working explicitly to influence the school's intake:

> There is a certain pressure on schools to make sure that you have a good open evening, you attract the right intake, if you like. … And I suppose my vision of [the school] is that we would provide a very high level of education, commensurate almost with private education, but we are state-funded. So, it's that perception that we want to give to the community.
>
> Headteacher, primary convertor academy, Ofsted Good

The headteacher reported governors also wanted to attract 'a certain kind' of parent who was 'fairly middle-class – you would expect a certain level of intellect, certain level of income'. In this context, the deputy head noted the importance of promotion, as parents were often 'active choosers, who visit a number of schools before making a choice'. The school needed, the deputy argued, to be *seen* to be better than other schools, particularly in terms of Ofsted, with the current main aim being to achieve an 'Outstanding' grade. The school also worked hard on external activities seen as high status. The assistant head explained these included working with charities and local businesses, keeping the school's profile high in the local newspaper and ensuring students did well in performing arts festivals, as these were important competitive events.

Strategies for moving up the local status hierarchy

Efforts by schools to protect their status or engineer a move up the local hierarchy were widely reported across the four localities, particularly among secondary schools. Sometimes these moves were slow and unspectacular, including where a school's leaders and teachers worked hard over time to

build trust and support in the local community for authentic improvement in student learning. But hierarchical positioning and moves generally reflected wider patterns of stratification, with school intakes changing as a result of leadership actions as well as wider changes in the socio-economic and ethnic composition of local areas.

Van Zanten (2009) argues (from research in eight European cities, including London), that the competitive orientations of schools commonly reflect both their hierarchical positioning and the nature of the local market. In a closed and stable local market, Van Zanten argues, higher-status schools are often 'monopolistic', relying on their reputation without actively competing. By contrast, lower-status schools, sensing the market is impervious, are 'adaptive', turning inwards to adapt to their existing students. In a more open and unstable market, however, high-status schools often need to become 'entrepreneurial', paying close attention to promotional and selective strategies, while lower-status schools are 'tactical', seeking to improve their positioning but recognizing their own strategies will rarely be as powerful as those of higher-status schools.

Among our sample of secondary schools – where competition was often intense and hierarchies widely recognized – there was a clear tendency for schools to be entrepreneurial or tactical. This was perhaps most notable where a school actively sought to return to a higher intermediate position having slid down the hierarchy. In one school, for instance, after a new headteacher was appointed, the school's improvement strategy included two main priorities. First, there was an intensive attainment push in Years 10 and 11, with closer tracking of student progress, regular work scrutinies and staff trained, as a head of department reported, on 'teaching to the exam' and improving coursework. Second, after this had helped the school gain a 'Good' Ofsted grade, there was a significant marketing campaign with a new website, promotional videos and advertising on local buses all highlighting the 'Good' grade and enrichment activities in science and music. This campaign focused, particularly, on attracting students from two schools just outside the locality. The headteacher saw this as 'aggressive' but effective:

> We were a little bit naughty there because [two] schools [outside the locality] went through a bad phase. So we stuck a minibus in there a few years ago and now we bring a double-decker out … But now we've become oversubscribed … they can't all get in any more.
>
> Headteacher, secondary convertor academy, Ofsted Good

By contrast, another secondary school was more tactical, accepting that it could not realistically move far up the local hierarchy, and so focusing on its 'inclusive' ethos as a way to attract parents:

> In terms of our marketing, we will tend to, we're always looking at different angles of marketing. We're never going to be able to sell our site as the best in [the locality], so it's in a sense, again, you can't worry

> about the things you haven't got. We will sell inclusion, we will sell the arts … because we've got such a strong reputation of the arts, parents are very much drawn to us, inclusion, SEN … we will sell high progress.
>
> Headteacher, secondary academy, Ofsted Good

Selective competition

Some leaders were more open about adopting selective competition tactics, or 'cream skimming', as a way to enhance their school's intake and status. Glennerster (1991: 1271) argued that competition in quasi-markets would create a context in which 'any entrepreneur acting rationally would seek to exclude pupils who would drag down the overall performance score of the school, its major selling point for parents'. While we know that school leaders rarely act purely in economically rational terms (Levacic, 2001, Van Zanten, 2009), there were nevertheless real pressures to take decisions in the perceived interests of one's own institution, even where these were also considered morally dubious or against one's professional or personal values. For example, one headteacher of a previously monopolistic school faced now with a new school build in the most affluent part of its catchment and a nearby free school, reported how:

> 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

There was widespread recognition of the reasons for this headteacher's competitive and entrepreneurial yet uncomfortable position in our localities research, although there was very little support for the quasi-market policies that incentivized such practices. Similarly, among our survey respondents, less than a third of primary schools and only 12 per cent of secondary schools agreed with the statement: 'the level of competition between schools locally has a positive effect'. (One reason for this phase difference may be that primary schools reported facing less competition.)

Our analysis of national Ofsted data indicates a clear overall association between retaining or changing an Ofsted grade and the socio-economic composition of a school's student body. We set out headline findings from the analysis in Box 1. This shows that schools judged Good and Outstanding between 2010 and 2015 saw a relative reduction in the percentage of students eligible for free school meals (FSMs) compared to the 2005–10 period, while schools judged Satisfactory, Requires Improvement and Inadequate saw a relative increase. Furthermore, this association was accentuated by changes in Ofsted grade: so, for example, schools that retained an Outstanding grade between 2010 and 2015 saw

a greater relative reduction in FSM pupils compared to schools that were Outstanding in 2010 but that had been downgraded by 2015. The nature of Ofsted data makes this analysis essentially descriptive and we did not aim to disentangle correlations in terms of causality. However, it does indicate a clear association between changes in Ofsted grade and changes in levels of student deprivation.

Box 1: Are changes in a school's Ofsted grade associated with changes in the socio-economic composition of a school's students?

We analysed Ofsted grades over the decade 2005–15. This included analysis of whether changes in Ofsted grading over time were associated with changes in a school's student composition, including the socio-economic composition of students using Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility as a proxy.[14] This analysis suggests a clear association between Ofsted grade and changes in student intake by FSM eligibility.

Table 4.1a sets out this analysis for primary schools. It shows that schools that were judged Good and Outstanding in 2010 saw a relative *reduction* in the level of deprivation in their pupil intake between 2010 and 2015. By contrast, schools judged Satisfactory/RI and Inadequate in 2010 saw a relative *increase* in deprivation over the same time period.

Tables 4.1b, 4.1c and 4.1d show these trends in relation to whether schools retained the same Ofsted grade in 2015 (4.1b), received a higher rating by 2015 (4.1c), or were downgraded by 2015 (4.1d). These show how the overall association between Ofsted grade and Free School Meal eligibility was accentuated by changes in Ofsted grade. Schools that retained an Outstanding grade saw a greater relative reduction in FSM pupils (0.1903) compared to Outstanding schools that were downgraded (0.1337) between 2010 and 2015. Similarly, for Good schools, improving to Outstanding was associated with a larger relative reduction in FSM eligible students than Good schools that retained the same grading. Schools that were judged Satisfactory/RI in 2010 but then improved their Ofsted grade between 2010 and 2015 saw little relative change in FSM eligibility (0.0088). By comparison schools that either retained a Satisfactory/RI grade (0.0794) or were downgraded (0.0953), saw a relative increase in FSM eligibility. Schools that retained an Inadequate grade experienced the largest relative increase in FSM eligibility.

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15 See Annex 1 for the methodology for this phase of the research. It is important to note the standard errors (se) throughout this chapter – the lower the standard error, the more accurate the estimated mean and the more precisely the mean can be generalized to the entire population. The use of colour coding in the tables is intended to support ease of reading and does not denote statistical significance. The analysis was based on standardized FSM eligibility rates, to account for overall trends over the decade. The analysis reports changes in the standardized averages (for 05/10 and 11/15) and as such measures change in terms of standard deviations. This analysis is therefore comparable between the groups of schools graded differently by Ofsted and is independent of underlying trends in FSM rates.

Table 4.1a – Changes in primary school FSM levels by 2010 Ofsted rating			
Ofsted	Diff	Se	N
Outstanding	-0.1664	0.0069	1,592
Good	-0.0749	0.0039	5,821
Satisfactory/RI	0.0274	0.0055	3,999
Inadequate	0.0974	0.0214	315

Table 4.1b – Changes in primary school FSM levels by 2010 Ofsted rating where the rating remained the same in 2015			
Ofsted	Diff	Se	N
Outstanding	-0.1903	0.0084	920
Good	-0.0768	0.0046	4,081
Satisfactory/RI	0.0794	0.0121	813
Inadequate	0.1591	0.1135	11

Table 4.1c – Changes in primary schools FSM levels by 2010 Ofsted rating where the rating was higher in 2015			
Ofsted	Diff	Se	N
Outstanding			
Good	-0.1552	0.0108	727
Satisfactory/RI	0.0088	0.0063	2,991
Inadequate	0.0952	0.0218	304

Table 4.1d – Changes in primary school FSM levels by 2010 Ofsted rating where the rating was lower in 2015			
Ofsted	Diff	Se	N
Outstanding	-0.1337	0.0114	672
Good	-0.0093	0.0099	1,013
Satisfactory/RI	0.0953	0.0243	195
Inadequate			

These trends were very similar among secondary schools. As set out in Table 4.1e, Good and particularly Outstanding schools saw a relative reduction in the level of deprivation in their pupil intake between the two periods, while Satisfactory/RI and Inadequate schools saw a relative increase. This applies to all schools irrespective of their 2015 rating (with the exception of Satisfactory/RI schools in 2010 that improved their rating by 2015 and experienced a reduction in FSM eligibility).

Table 4.1e – Changes in secondary school FSM levels by 2010 Ofsted rating			
Ofsted	Diff	Se	N
Outstanding	-0.1598	0.0084	601
Good	-0.0611	0.0063	1,163
Satisfactory/RI	0.0160	0.0096	881
Inadequate	0.1244	0.0220	105

Table 4.1f – Changes in secondary school FSM levels by 2010 Ofsted rating where rating remained the same in 2015			
Ofsted	Diff	Se	N
Outstanding	-0.1678	0.0102	353
Good	-0.0642	0.0079	664
Satisfactory/RI	0.0631	0.0171	280
Inadequate	0.1908	0.0491	12

Table 4.1g – Changes in secondary school FSM levels by 2010 Ofsted rating where rating was higher in 2015			
Ofsted	Diff	Se	N
Outstanding			
Good	-0.1214	0.0137	199
Satisfactory/RI	-0.0107	0.0122	502
Inadequate	0.1158	0.0240	93

Table 4.1h – Changes in secondary school FSM levels by 2010 Ofsted rating where rating was lower in 2015			
Ofsted	Diff	Se	N
Outstanding	-0.1483	0.0145	248
Good	-0.0143	0.0141	300
Satisfactory/RI	0.0176	0.0321	99
Inadequate			

The consequences of local hierarchies and selective competition

One consequence of local hierarchies and selective competition was that schools – and particularly school leaders – could end up with different perceptions of their locality and the children within it.

It was not uncommon, for instance, for higher-status schools to describe recent growth in student numbers as a locality-wide phenomenon, while lower-status schools held concerns about either under-subscription or increasing numbers of international migrants, refugees and 'Bedroom Tax migrants' being concentrated in lower cost housing in their community.

Similarly there was evidence schools had different interpretations of what constituted 'challenging' student behaviour. Several schools in one locality, for instance, had been shocked to learn a higher-status neighbour made referrals to children's social care for 'repeated swearing' when, one of the headteachers argued, referrals 'in my staff's head [are for] things like biting, kicking, spitting … injuring people'. Another headteacher argued that this created real tensions between schools, stemming from the fact that 'some schools are so completely different to other schools'.

These differences in perception reflected more fundamental differences in the experience of different schools. The lower-status schools in our sample frequently faced a concentration of challenges including under-subscription, higher student mobility and disproportionate numbers of disadvantaged, migrant and hard to place children.

As we explore in Chapter 5, there were several examples in our locality research where potentially meaningful and mutually beneficial collaboration had been undermined by competitive pressures between schools. In more competitive environments, for example, school leaders were more likely to report an unwillingness to work with other local schools, particularly if they perceived doing so would put their own school's hierarchical status at risk.

Efforts to reduce the influence of competition

The localities research did reveal a variety of attempts to actively manage down local tensions and competitive incentives. These efforts ranged from individual schools agreeing to not market in each other's neighbourhoods to new locality-wide principles for behaviour, including agreements not to 'deliberately poach' existing students or staff. Combined with these actions, 'fair access panels', brokered by LAs, were reported to have the potential of giving lower-status schools a stronger voice in decisions over admissions and hard to place students. Encouragingly, just over half of our survey respondents agreed with the statement: 'There is a strong "fair access protocol" in my locality that works well.'

These attempts to 'manage down' competition could, however, appear as sticking plaster solutions – attempting to cover over underlying problems rather than solving them. While the LAs in our localities were working in different ways to secure equity and ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable students were addressed, these efforts did not address the structural reproduction of unequal and segregated student intakes. Rather, the placing of students could work to exacerbate choice patterns, where local authority staff, under pressure to place a child and faced with resistance from over-subscribed schools, went back time and again 'to the [schools] where [students] get a better welcome … that did a good job … because

they knew that would be easy'. In this context, one headteacher argued, fair access panels were welcome but too often meant going to defend the school over individual cases rather than working to change the wider culture.

Local agreements on competition were also fragile when unwritten rules were broken. One primary headteacher, for instance, described a context in which schools asked each other: 'Is it OK if we advertise in the paper for our open day?' This was a polite veneer, as the headteacher admitted: 'I think we'd still do it, even if they said no'. The veneer cracked, however, when one higher-status school converted to become an academy increased its Published Admissions Number and quickly admitted more students, which, another local headteacher argued 'had a terrible effect on us'. Similarly, what initially looked like a non-competition pact could in fact be a temporary strategic truce. One secondary head described, for example, 'wading in' as the new head, with adverts and a prospectus, before finding 'all hell breaks loose because apparently that's not cricket'.

New market pressures resulting from the SISS policy agenda

Overlaying these complex local patterns and status hierarchies, the SISS agenda was widely perceived to be encouraging, and sometimes demanding, new types of competition between schools. While these newer forms of competition could often be traced back to the local status hierarchies described above, their terrain was often much broader, for example as schools became providers of school improvement to other schools in the context of reduced LA capacity. Higher-status schools were often 'well positioned' to take on these new positions of influence (Coldron *et al.*, 2014), for example as a result of formal system leadership designations and roles.

At least three emerging processes were identifiable in our four localities.

First, the new relations between schools encouraged by the SISS agenda were simultaneously creating both new spaces for collaboration *and* a new terrain over which competitive relations were being extended. TSAs, for instance, offered a structure in which existing and new inter-organizational networks could be developed. At the same time, tensions and struggles were manifest over which schools led TSAs, how TSAs were organized, which schools became alliance partners and how tensions between TSAs were to be resolved – which we discuss in Chapter 5.

In one locality, for example, a TSA organized by the historic highest status school had replicated an existing collaborative of secondary schools, in which staff development was co-organized and competitive relations managed down. The creation, however, of a second TSA in the locality – by a school that had made recent upward hierarchical moves – meant the two Teaching Schools were competing, particularly for primary school alliance partners. For the headteacher of the newer TSA, this was difficult territory. S/he felt the original Teaching School had assumed a position of privilege and power, that was now being challenged. Equally, however, the

headteacher was clear s/he didn't want to 'create conflict at a local level that could impact badly for our school'.

Secondly, running within this mix of collaboration and competition were new relations of dependence and patronage. A range of schools noted how they were coming to rely more on higher-status schools, whose growing influence they either needed to accept (often because such school-to-school support came with national funding attached) or try to find alternatives. This was reported widely for instance in relation to staff recruitment at a time of widespread recruitment challenges. Being involved in School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) or leading the selection of School Direct candidates had significant advantages in this context, since it gave the school first choice from any local pool of trainees. But these choices were not distributed evenly. For example, one secondary headteacher noted the school's increasing reliance on a TSA – located outside the locality – that the school had joined as a strategic partner. While the headteacher was involved in the provision of School Direct within the Alliance, when s/he tried to appoint the trainees it became clear that the Teaching School had already offered them jobs.

Third, and more widely, a 'new knowledge economy' was emerging in which schools not only needed to identify and secure their own support, they also faced new incentives and opportunities to *both* share and co-construct knowledge *and* to think of their own organizational resources and 'intellectual capital' as tradable commodities. This was seen to be creating hybrid organizational aims, for instance, where TSAs were combining a mix of non-charged collaborative provision (in which member schools both provide and receive services from each other without payment) and paid for provision. We explore TSAs in more detail in Chapter 5, setting out three typical trajectories for how they are developing.

This mixing of aims was developing alongside a diversifying economy of support for schools. In the previous chapter we showed findings from the survey of where schools have drawn on external forms of support over the past 12 months. While traditional sources of support from LAs and local clusters of schools were the most common sources used, a significant minority used services provided by commercial service providers and consultants and by designated 'system-leader' schools. For example, around half of secondary schools rated Requires Improvement or Inadequate had drawn on a Teaching School, a commercial consultant, or an NLE or LLE in the past year.

In this variety of ways, old and new forms of support and influence were developing in the context of existing competitive interdependences between schools. In part because of their higher status and in part because of the new opportunities for influence and responsibility they were taking on (or choosing not to), the actions of particular schools – and the values and disposition of their senior leaders – were becoming increasingly important locally. This is clearly illustrated in the case of three primary schools in one locality – discussed in the extended vignette below – that took up different positions in relation to the emerging 'knowledge economy'.

Extended vignette: sell, protect or share?

The positioning of three primary schools in relation to their own and other schools' 'intellectual capital' gave a clear insight into the emerging new knowledge economy. All three schools were judged to be Outstanding and all three were strategic partners in the same primary TSA. They were all leading on aspects of the Big Six locally[16] – but they were all doing this in different ways, with very different effects. The schools' actions partly reflected their dominant values – and the dispositions particularly of their headteachers – but were also, in the schools' own analyses, part of their response to the wider context and policy environment. The local direction of travel was towards both the commercialization of knowledge and the encircling of schools into independent hard governance groupings, but the three schools were responding very differently. Their dominant 'logics of action' (Van Zanten, 2009) were: *to sell; to protect; and to share*. We consider each in turn before then exploring the tensions experienced in each case.

School 1) Selling

School 1 was working to sell knowledge and sought explicitly to make money from doing so. It was a relatively open school, particularly if schools were prepared to pay. The headteacher described the school's positioning as follows:

> We converted to be a MAT … this year. When you are an academy, as you probably know, you have the opportunity to trade, if you so wish. And we wish. … The trading arm offers professional development and support … and we want to make money.

The school's 'trading arm' had developed out of a series of activities. The school had been asked by the LA to provide local CPD courses. It had also developed a hard governance federation and then a MAT to take over a nearby primary school. The headteacher described how the school's systems had been transferred, almost in replica, to the federated school, having asked the deputy head 'to write a manual for how to do our school, a comprehensive (instruction) manual, like you might have for a car'. The two schools were now, the headteacher argued, essentially one school with two locations: 'they're like branches of the same company'.

These experiences informed the new 'trading arm'. Having run CPD on Ofsted and leadership locally, the trading arm added 'hot topics such as assessment', but the focus was on selling training to help improve inspection outcomes. This was because, the headteacher argued, 'some things fly. Anything to do with Ofsted usually does, because it's the only thing people are really frightened of.' The headteacher and two senior leaders were trained and practising Ofsted inspectors as this offered insight and credibility. The school's MAT was also used in the trading arm's courses

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16 The 'Big Six' areas were: Initial Teacher Education; CPD and leadership development; succession planning; Specialist Leaders of Education; school-to-school support; research and development.

as 'a real working example' so that 'when we run events, we want people to come into the classroom, typically practitioners, and see, with regular kids, how we work … how you can become part of a dialogue with a practitioner to help you'. This was seen as a unique selling point and the headteacher reported it produced 'income, so we have a target to turn over six figures within two years, with more after that'.

SCHOOL 2) PROTECTING

The second school, by contrast, worked to protect its organizational knowledge, time and resources, which it understood as both 'looking after' and 'shielding'. The school did this by organizing almost all CPD internally, buying in consultant support and collaborating only on specific practices, where another school had clearly identifiable strengths. The school was often seen locally as exclusive and closed, even purposefully isolationist. The headteacher described the school as follows:

> We're strong enough to be able to do it on our own, and I think we have sufficient expertise within our four walls … occasionally, we will need to pull in some support … So, we are not arrogant to think we're so good, bye-bye! We would want some verification that we are doing the right thing. … We have enough to pay for that.

The school's willingness to pay for external review contrasted with its critique and even suspicion of collaboration. The school's focus, the headteacher argued, was on 'retaining Outstanding' which was 'very difficult' and collaboration was seen to: waste staff time; involve other schools that may not have specific expertise to offer; imply unwanted reciprocity; and, most importantly, lead to staff being poached. The school's work in the TSA focused on School Direct and organizing the candidate selection process – allowing relatively independent work and the headteacher to be clear on 'what's in it for me'. The headteacher had developed relations of support with a small number of trusted peers, but few, if any, of these external ties engaged classroom teachers in meaningful collaboration with teachers in other schools.

SCHOOL 3) SHARING

Unlike School 2, School 3 was willing to find common ground with partners and try to balance its own needs and interests with those of other schools equitably. School 3 attached real importance to collaboration and worked to share and jointly develop practice-based knowledge with a range of different partners. As a result, the school had collaborated with a majority of primary schools in the locality and was seen locally as an expert and ideal collaborator. The deputy headteacher described the school's dominant positioning as follows:

> We think something that is really important, in the culture of the school, is to share that good practice, so I think it's always been driven that way

here, always seeing it like, you can never run on your own … and not just be seen as 'oh that's my idea so I'll just keep it in this organization' or whatever … You can't be Outstanding without sharing good practice … it's always been seen as very, very, very important. It's one of our school priorities.

Alongside a wide range of informal partnerships, School 3 also led the 'research and development' theme for the primary TSA – work that was widely praised locally – and had recently joined a new secondary TSA to lead Initial Teacher Training for primary schools. The ability of a three-form entry primary school to take on so many local network roles came, in part, from pooling resources and expertise with collaborating partners. The school had also organized itself to clearly identify staff time for collaboration. School leaders co-ordinated and co-managed school networks as part of their leadership roles. Teachers were also actively involved in network research projects and in offering CPD training – activities that were scheduled to prevent conflicts with teaching timetables and to allow staff from other schools to participate.

Tensions

In all three cases – but particularly for the schools 'sharing' and 'protecting' their 'intellectual capital', there were tensions in and disruptions to the schools' dominant positioning. These highlighted the possibilities and difficulties in pursuing certain types of work.

- Sharing

In the case of School 3, a clear tension was building lateral, collaborative networks in the contexts of markets and hierarchy. One challenge was funding. While the school sought out external support for research projects, the majority of funding for collaborative work came from running CPD courses. This was not secure funding and, crucially, encouraged the school to run courses as a traded service. The school needed to advertise locally and online and reported a clear difference between working with collaborators and running courses with attendees cast as paying customers. The school did not want to develop a business mentality, but as the assistant head noted, there were incentives to do this in the local school support model: 'It kind of works that way … People pay us to do that'.

A second related tension was that the school was expected to provide 'support' to other schools when this was brokered by the LA. This stood in tension with the school's commitment to lateral, joint practice development. The assistant head explained how there had been a lack of consent from two 'supported schools', leading to a lack of sustainability and little mutual learning for School 3 that came from greater openness and trust. It had been hard for the school to differentiate its collegial support aims from the interventional roles it was being asked to take on.

In this context, the school had no plans to build a federation or a multi-academy trust or to sell CPD or support services more widely. Rather

it was focused on working with and finding partners that shared the school's aims and values.

- Protecting

For School 2, protecting and shielding its knowledge and resources, there was real concern about sustaining its independence while receiving 'less human resources, less legal support, less of those periphery things that you got in the local authority'. This had created financial and organizational pressures to change its isolationist stance. Initially the headteacher had investigated converting to academy status, arguing: 'Believe you me, if we could have done it alone, we would be an academy long ago.' There was, however, the headteacher argued, insufficient funding for a primary school to academize alone. The funding incentives were to 'go in a group' and there was also a perceived need to achieve economies of scale in a 'federation in order to buy in all those other periphery things that you never bought before'. In response the school was looking to build and lead a local federation or MAT, but, in part due to its broader outlook, the headteacher had found it difficult to recruit partners: 'We are finding it very difficult to get schools to come in with us.'

- Selling

Tensions were less apparent in School 1. The headteacher had to convince the MAT's directors that the trading arm was in the interests of the federation. This was done, the head argued, by showing: how paying '£5,000 extra a year' to run CPD courses helped retain staff; and that profit was being invested in specific school projects and acted to mitigate the risks of continued austerity. A second challenge might have been selling courses and improvement support, but the headteacher argued this had become increasingly easy: 'in the world where the reach and power of the local authority's school improvement teams has dwindled, in some places disappeared, therefore there is nothing locally for schools to turn to, no one to turn to'. In some cases schools were paying simply for 'encouragement'. There were competitors – particularly 'the big boys, the Capitas, the SERCOs, and so on', but 'we're probably a bit cynical about the quality of that work'. To compete, the school had branded the trading arm because: 'You need an identity. You need to market it'. Going forward, School 1's MAT was planning to increase from two to four schools but no further, the headteacher argued, based on a clear financial business model.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the continuing importance and influence of quasi-market policies within the SISS policy agenda. The core elements of this policy framework – parental choice of school and funding following the learner – date back to the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA). Not surprisingly therefore, many of the findings set out in the first part of this chapter reflect and update previous research into quasi-markets in England. We saw that the vast majority of schools recognize local status

hierarchies and are working to protect or improve their position within such hierarchies through a mixture of strategic and tactical measures. Improving a school's Ofsted grade is often the most immediate strategy for improving its reputation, although this worked differently in different contexts and school leaders were frequently engaged in a wider array of more or less overt marketing activities aimed at attracting particular parents to their school – efforts that Glennerster (1991) termed 'selective' rather than 'efficient' competition. Our analysis of Ofsted inspection data also showed that schools with higher inspection grades had become relatively less deprived during the period 2010–15, while the reverse was true for schools judged as Requires Improvement or Inadequate.

We also saw that the SISS policy agenda is creating new forms of competition and that this is often accentuating the role of local status hierarchies, as 'well positioned' schools take advantage of their status to acquire additional resources and influence. These 'system leader' schools now operate as part of the wider school improvement marketplace, often competing with LA traded services and private sector providers to trade their knowledge and expertise. This 'knowledge' includes both tacit expertise that resides in expert practitioners (such as SLEs) as well as explicit procedural knowledge (for example, sold as courses on how to improve your Ofsted grade). We saw in the example of the three Outstanding primary schools that different schools can have very different conceptions of whether to *protect*, *sell* or *share* this knowledge.

Finally, the development of the 'new knowledge economy' in which high-status schools either protect, sell or share practice-based knowledge is contributing to increased differentiation between schools in the system. The incentives for high-status schools to package and 'sell' their procedural knowledge, in particular, contrasts with the development of 'deep partnerships' and joint practice development, which Hargreaves argues are core requirements for a 'self-improving system'. Where knowledge and expertise are sold in this way, we found there is a tendency to focus on the types of knowledge that can be easily codified and commoditized (as 'best practices'). We explore these issues further in the following chapter on Networks.

Chapter 5

Networks: school-to-school partnerships and the move towards MATs

The English school system has a diverse array of often overlapping and sometimes competing networks, many of which pre-date the advent of the SISS agenda. These networks exist within, between and beyond schools, disrupting the idea that schools or local school systems are organized simply through hierarchy and markets (Weick, 1976).

Networks are often argued to involve both a level of trust, so that a reputation for (sufficient) honesty and consistency develops between members; and a set of interdependencies, so that network members share resources and/or work towards common purposes (Thompson, 2003). Through these experiences, networks can develop multiple lateral relations that sustain a variety of communication and co-operation – including mutual support and advice, resource sharing, knowledge diffusion and innovation. As a result, networks are often argued to be effective in responding to intractable or 'wicked' issues that require 'distributed expertise' (Daniels and Edwards, 2012).

For these reasons, networks can be an appealing concept, holding out the potential for horizontal, equitable and participative relations as an alternative to the administrative orders of hierarchy and the competition of markets (Powell, 1990). But networks can also sustain contrasting, even contradictory, relations (Grimaldi, 2011). For instance, networks can develop equitable partnerships, but can also support asymmetric power relations in which particular members gain authority and secure unequal gains and this can erode trust (Kamp, 2013). Networks can be open and inclusive, but can also be closed and exclusive where members develop a preference to interact with insiders or seek to manage and restrict flows of knowledge (Hatcher, 2008). Networks can be flat and horizontal, but can also contain their own internal hierarchies (Lieberman and McLaughlin, 1992). Further, while networks can be co-ordinated on the basis of trust, external risk, suspicion and fear can also motivate people or organizations to collaborate without trust (Cook *et al.*, 2007).

These tensions are more or less apparent in different contexts. How a network is formed is significant: mandated or externally incentivized networks can struggle to move beyond surface-level collaboration, while even non-mandated networks can struggle with power imbalances that corrode trust (Popp *et al.*, 2014; Kamp, 2013). The agency of network members is also important: leading and managing networks has been argued to require sophisticated 'network competencies' as well as an openness to

engage with the moral and political dilemmas that networks present, but such leadership skills and agency are by no means universally present in all contexts (Popp *et al.*, 2014; Wheatley and Frieze, 2011; Lumby, 2009; Vangen and Huxham, 2013).

In the context of these potential tensions, the focus in this chapter is on inter-organizational partnerships between schools. We follow Provan and Kenis to define these partnerships as being constituted by three or more 'legally autonomous organizations that work together' (Provan and Kenis, 2008: 231)[17]. This focus on inter-school partnerships limits our analysis and we recognize that we thereby exclude a diversity of other networks, but argue that it is justified because such partnerships and particular new types of multi-school groups are one preoccupation of the SISS policy agenda. We begin by examining 'local clusters', as a widespread inter-organizational partnership form in England. We then analyse Teaching School Alliances, which were advanced in policy from 2010 and were posited by Hargreaves (2012) to be a basis of the 'deep partnerships' that he argued should be central to a 'self-improving system'. Finally we analyse MATs, although we challenge the notion that MATs operate as partnerships, given they are in fact a 'single legal entity' (DfE, 2017: 47) and academies within MATs have 'no legal existence free standing from the chain of which it is part' (Wolfe, 2013: 109).

School-to-school partnerships – an overview

We start by providing an overview of school-to-school partnerships in our case study localities and from our survey. We asked our case study headteachers to identify all of: 'the schools your school collaborates with, in a meaningful way'.[18] Primary headteachers reported collaborating, on average, with ten other schools, while secondary headteachers reported an average of 13 schools. The overall range was from two to 28 schools. Ties with schools in the same phase were reported to be the most common: among primary schools, 82 per cent of meaningful ties were with other primary schools, while among secondary schools, 64 per cent of ties were with other secondaries.

We also collected a small amount of data on each identified tie. The average length of time a tie had existed with another school was reported to be just over five years, but the mode was one year. We also asked about the regularity of collaborative activity between schools, in terms of the approximate number of staff interactions the schools had had the previous term. While a minority of schools only collaborated infrequently (once or twice a term), the majority had both regular interactions with one or

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17 We sometimes use the terms *partnership* and *network* interchangeably in this chapter, as our definition recognizes that a partnership is a formalized network. Our interviewees used both terms along with wider terminology, such as *cluster* and *alliance*, which we adopt in the relevant sections.

18 Twenty-five primary and 15 secondary schools completed this task. Eight primary and four secondary schools did not complete the proforma due to time constraints reported by the headteacher.

two schools (and less frequently three or four schools) and less regular interaction with their other ties. This indicates that a pattern of a smaller number of long-term and more intensive ties and a larger number of newer and less intensive ties is common for these schools.

We also asked our survey respondents to identify how many schools their school collaborated with in a meaningful way. A similar number of ties was reported, with nine by primary and ten by secondary respondents (compared to nine and 13 respectively above). The range here was zero to 64 ties, with two per cent of respondents reporting that their schools did not collaborate with any other school in a meaningful way. Respondents were asked to identify – from a list – which term best described their strongest partnership. As Figure 5.1 shows, primary schools (67 per cent) were most likely to describe this as their local cluster. Secondary schools were also most likely to describe this as their local cluster (40 per cent), although around one in five secondary schools described their strongest partnership as a MAT (22 per cent) or TSA (20 per cent).[19] These findings are in line with the findings reported in Chapter 3 that schools are most likely to turn to their local cluster for improvement support.
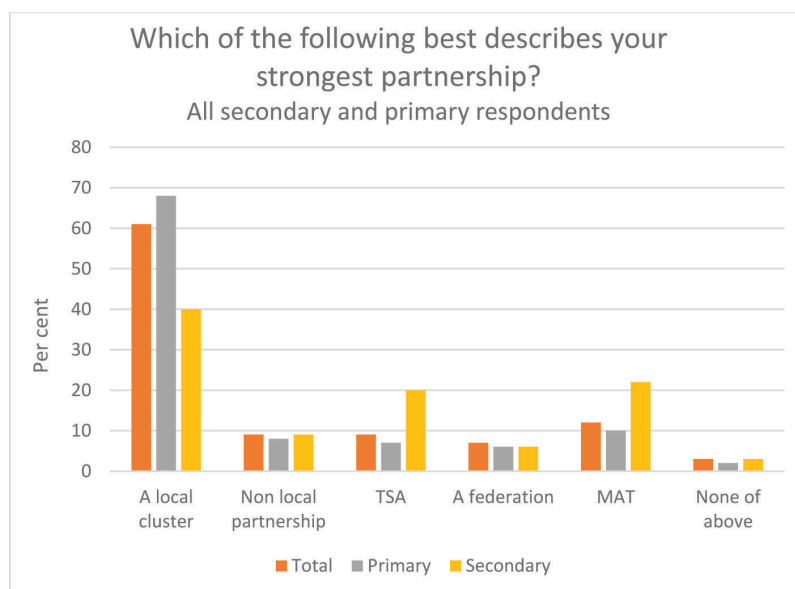
Figure 5.1: Survey response – strongest partnership with other schools. All secondary and primary respondents with at least one strong tie (n=612).

Local clusters of schools

We employed the term 'local cluster' in the survey as it was referred to regularly in our initial case study visits. In practice, 'local cluster' describes a range of network forms and relations between schools and a diversity of activities, including joint extra-curricular provision, headteacher meetings,

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19 We included MATs in this question to reflect both common policy statements and the findings from the locality research (where interviewees sometimes referred to MATs as partnerships) even though we do not define MATs as partnerships.

curriculum or subject leader networks, assessment and moderation groups, peer reviews, research projects and joint practice development or shared CPD. There were also, however, several common features to local clusters in our four localities. Cluster membership was often voluntary and could be fluid, but was usually drawn from a distinct local area with neighbouring or partly neighbouring schools. Clusters rarely had formal governance structures, with shared decision-making usually sited informally within a cluster headteachers' group. Cluster origins often lay in previous local authority-led initiatives, but these had also commonly been overlain with other initiatives and aims over time.

We did encounter examples of cross-phase cluster activity in the research, but these were less common, so we focus here on primary to primary and secondary to secondary clusters.

Primary school clusters
The aims and activities of primary school clusters and the regularity and perceived strength of cluster ties varied substantially. In Southern LA, for example, there were 11 primary school clusters and our research visits provided insights into five of them. We also interviewed a local authority officer who – in briefly describing each cluster – used three of these five as being characteristic of the diversity of clusters locally, so we outline these here to provide a sense of the range of practice and the issues that arise.

The first cluster – Westside Heads – included seven primary schools in an area with low levels of deprivation. The cluster had existed for a decade and current activities included student sports competitions and music and drama events. The schools' headteachers met three times a year to plan events and discuss 'operational issues'. One headteacher described discussing issues such as: 'How are you dealing with life after levels? I had an irate parent who did this – how would you deal with that situation?' The headteacher also reported, however, that the school had weak ties with all the cluster schools and the deputy head described how cluster meetings (that s/he had attended instead of the head) were not always well attended. There was also increasing competition between several cluster schools over student recruitment, resulting from both an over-supply of nursery places and attempts by one school to become more socially selective (as discussed on page 55).

The second cluster – Schools Together – included all the Catholic primaries in the authority. Having met termly while being members of other local clusters, one school proposed a 'Catholic school improvement alliance'. This was initially resisted by other headteachers, who were reported to be cautious about the motives of the proposing school, which was the only 'Outstanding' Catholic primary locally and served the least deprived students. The idea of a new alliance resurfaced after two headteachers retired and another was removed from post after a diocesan inspection. The head of the Outstanding school reported how peers 'kept saying "how do we stop that happening to one of us"'. S/he persuaded them the answer was 'to support one another and collaborate'. With cautious acceptance by

the majority of schools, the cluster had developed cross-school moderation exercises and was embarking on joint research projects. Summarizing progress, another head reported how: 'the overall general feeling is now there, but what that looks like on paper in terms of real actions is a little more difficult to pin down.'

The third cluster – Learning Links – was comprised of nine primary schools. Four schools serving deprived urban communities had established the network eight years earlier. The schools wanted to develop CPD for teachers collectively and argued that their existing local authority clusters did not share that focus. The cluster had grown through personal invitations to headteachers of schools that were perceived to offer something to the network. The cluster was thus a local but non-geographical network of schools serving predominately deprived urban neighbourhoods. To join the network, schools committed financially (£3,000 annually) and released senior leaders and (less regularly) teachers for cluster activities. Part of the funding paid for a retired headteacher (formerly of one of the member schools) to facilitate and chair the cluster. The cluster had retained a focus on teacher training, but had also developed a range of activities to share and jointly develop teaching and learning practices – see Box 2. For interviewees at both of the member schools we visited, Learning Links was very important to the work and daily life of their schools and their main source of staff professional development and external support.

Box 2: The Learning Links primary cluster
The aims of the network are around student progress and improving the quality of teaching and leadership. One headteacher interviewee recognized that these aims could be seen as narrowly focused on national accountability requirements, but also gave an example of where membership of the network had given him/her both the confidence and peer pressure to resist narrowing the curriculum down to focus on core subjects in the face of some poor results.

Evolution: A gradual layering of activities
Learning Links's work developed originally around CPD and NQT recruitment. The CPD programme now included: PGCE placements; an NQT programme; leadership development programmes and headteacher conferences.

Moderation of student work was also an early function of the network, with three deputy heads of member schools leading annual moderation meetings for Year 2, 4 or 6 teachers. This work had led to discussions about how the schools could share more information about their classroom practice and student progress data. This led into a layering of new activities over time, including:

i) The appointment of a common SIP for all member schools.

ii) Common reporting to governors, and annual shared governor meetings.

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iii) Peer-evaluation/review.

iv) Sharing of student progress data, with the aim of developing the network's identification of potentially good practice and areas for mutual support.

The schools had also trialled several different approaches to sharing practices between schools that had proved unwieldy or ineffective and so had been abandoned. These included a 'good practice brochure' and a co-ordinated brokerage system for school-to-school visits. At the time of our visit the schools were trialling an informal but structured approach to visits, in which each school organized its own visits but using a common format for preparation (including a training session on the theory of a specific practice), observation in pairs (with time for post-observation discussion), action planning and feedback. The network was also developing new opportunities for staff to jointly research classroom practice.

Network challenges
While there were clear strengths to the Learning Links approach, there were also a number of challenges.

One recent example concerned a substantial 'dead-end' that had distracted the schools and the network from its core purposes. It started because a network Teaching School Alliance application was turned down. The schools decided to trial their own 'training school' instead – to provide NQT and CPD training and support inside and also beyond the network. They bought in a consultant to help establish this, but after six months the schools felt that the project was starting to 'dictate what needs to be done'. Too many teachers were being taken out of class (to be trained as trainers and then to provide training) and the finances of the new venture had come to dominate network meetings. The overall experience, according to one head, had been 'a bit of a difficult time really … People might have left, but they haven't left. … We've come out of it'.

Externally, some other schools in the LA accused Learning Links of exclusivity, as a result of the decision by the member schools to limit the network's numbers (at ten) and to only grow through invitation. Some schools also argued that the network was a club for Good and Outstanding schools. The Learning Links schools disputed this, arguing that what united them was the disadvantaged nature of their intakes and that the network included schools that had performed lower in Ofsted over the years.

Southern LA was now looking to work more directly with clusters rather than individual schools, informed by its work with Learning Links and a second cluster that it deemed effective. The LA saw in this a means to try to fulfil its responsibilities for school improvement, while managing funding

cuts. To make this shift, a priority for the LA was to focus clusters on 'school-to-school support' and 'improvement', defined in terms of student attainment and progress and Ofsted grade. The LA interviewee described this as changing 'old currency clusters' – that had done 'a lot of good work in arts activities, creative activities and whatever' – into clusters with a 'tightening focus on improvement'. It was for clusters to decide their own agenda but the LA was active in steering this, both through the use of additional funding and through its School Improvement Officers.

Schools, the LA interviewee argued, were generally supportive of this 'new model', as a means to try to sustain reduced authority support. There were, however, a number of tensions for our case study school leaders. First, the 'new model' added to existing pressures on schools to narrow provision away from the arts, sport and extra-curricular activities, which clusters had often supported. Second, the 'new model' was as yet unable to prevent uneven development between clusters. While two clusters were used as exemplars, three were just beginning to (re)form around improvement work (including Schools Together) and three others were not (including Westside Heads). Two other envisaged clusters – both in areas of significant deprivation – had yet to be formed.

A third tension related to how clusters should be governed internally, especially as they took on new responsibilities. While Learning Links had had a negative experience of external facilitation by a consultant, the authority was advocating for external facilitators and offered seed-funding linked to this expectation, arguing that facilitators could take on the burden of cluster co-ordination as well as guard against asymmetric power relations between schools:

> Without independent facilitation, you can get a very dominant lead …
> (it can be) orientated towards that head and what that head wants …
> you get other headteachers collectively agreeing, but individually not
> engaging.
>
> <div align="right">Local authority interviewee</div>

The governance of networks

One perspective on these governing dilemmas is offered by Provan and Kenis (2008) who analyse how networks co-ordinate collective action and address conflicts, with a focus on goal-directed (rather than spontaneous) networks of three or more organizations. They identify three typical models of governance:

> › 'Shared governance networks' – are governed by the organizations that are network members, so that every organization (or a significant subset) interacts 'with every other organization to govern the network, resulting in a dense and highly decentralized form' (2008: 234).
> › 'Lead organization networks' – are governed by one network member, with fewer member-to-member interactions over governance, so that governance occurs 'by and through a single organization, acting as a highly centralized network broker' (ibid: 234).

› 'Network Administrative Organizations (NAO)' – are networks governed externally by a 'separate administrative entity', established either by members or through external direction, so that while the NAO may be monitored by members 'key decisions are co-ordinated through and by a separate, independent' person or organization, often appointed as a manager or CEO (ibid: 235).

Figure 5.2 illustrates these structures and relations between members in each idealized network model. Provan and Kenis (2008) argue that, while many networks begin with informal 'shared governance', as they grow in size they commonly evolve towards a 'lead organization' or 'NAO' structure. This, they argue, is because the role of finding consensus, sustaining trust and organizing activities becomes more complex and burdensome in larger networks. However, Milward and Provan (2006: 22) acknowledge that lead organization networks can become dominated by the lead organization, while 'NAOs' can create a complex governing administration, with increased costs and decreased transparency. In both cases, this can precipitate declining commitment by members.
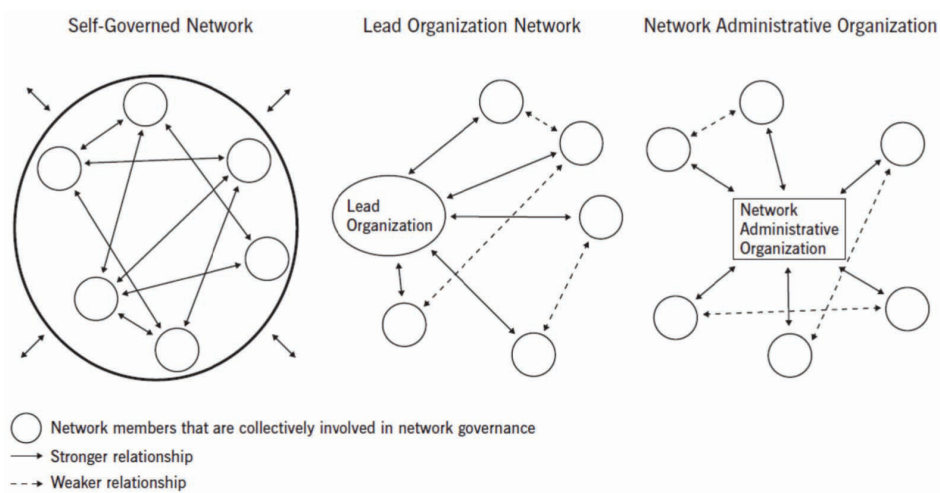
Figure 5.2: Network governance archetypes, adapted from Provan and Kenis (2007) in Popp *et al.*, 2015

This conceptualization offers insights into the process and impact of formalizing governance in LA-school clusters. In Southern, the LA clearly recognized a requirement to move away from the existing range of self-governed networks, both because it saw a need for a focus on school-to-school improvement and because it wanted to formalize its own steering relationship with the networks. However, it wanted to avoid lead organization networks that might be dominated by a single headteacher or school. Instead, it was allocating a dedicated LA SIO to work with each cluster and using its funding to incentivize clusters to appoint consultants as chairs/facilitators, thereby creating a hybrid, but relatively light-touch version of Provan and Kenis' NAO model.

In Northern LA, this trajectory towards an NAO was also apparent, although in a different form. As we noted on page 44, soon after 2010 the authority had supported primary schools to establish a locality-wide Education Partnership (EP). The EP had both a governing body of elected heads, school governors and an authority representative and a separate management team, with a senior manager and a small number of SIOs. The EP aimed to provide termly advisor visits, numeracy and literacy support and subsidized CPD for schools that paid a subscription. Rather than local clusters, the EP accredited 'hub' schools to provide training and 'tailored support' to other schools. The LA commissioned support from the EP for schools 'causing concern'. This model was welcomed by schools, although concerns were raised about the constraints set by the EP, with the senior manager 'telling off' hub schools that worked beyond their accreditation or did not charge for their services to other schools – thus placing limits on local spontaneous ties. The manager was also seen to use money as a form of control, using it to influence (or 'bribe') schools. Some schools had begun to question their membership, although all had renewed to date as they valued (some said 'needed') EP support and advice, particularly in preparing for and during Ofsted inspections.

As these cases demonstrate, moves to reorient and formalize primary school networks were widespread, but not unproblematic, in our case study localities. These networks took different forms, reflecting local histories and relations. Informal networks remained important to schools, but there were widely recognized motivations for formalizing local clusters, including austerity and cuts to LA support as well as national policy changes, including on assessment. LAs were working to sustain their own provision, manage down fragmentation and competition while finding new ways of governing 'with and through' networks. A majority of primary schools recognized the pressures to 'collaborate' – often because they valued the continued authority support on offer in clusters or partnerships; sometimes because they respected the authority's democratic mandate; and frequently because they reported feeling that 'it's more and more something we *need* to do' – although, as we illustrate above, our respondents also recognized the tensions inherent in this shift.

Meanwhile, a discourse on the dangers of 'the isolated school' was prevalent among our 'national system informants', underscored by concepts of efficiency (i.e. the need to purchase services and achieve economies of scale) and effectiveness (i.e. the need to find external 'challenge' and avoid risks of bounded rationality). As one NCTL respondent argued, for instance:

> My personal view is the worst place to be at the moment is on your own.

Secondary school clusters

These narratives on 'partnering' were also apparent among secondary schools, although interpreted slightly differently. Secondary schools were more likely to be or to have neighbours that were academies and to report working with greater independence from their local authority. They were

also more likely to perceive competition for students and, relatedly, local status, as we saw in Chapter 3. There were also contrasting influences on 'cluster' formation and relations among secondary schools, which pushed and pulled in at least two directions.

On the one hand, secondary schools were more likely to perceive a lack of trust between schools locally. For instance, asked about whether 'a lack of trust between schools in your area hinders meaningful collaboration', 40 per cent of our secondary school survey respondents agreed, compared to only 12 per cent among primary schools. On the other hand, however, secondary schools were more likely to report a need to self-organize and commission external support, due to perceived historic limitations in LA support. As they commissioned this support, many secondary schools expressed a preference for drawing on serving and recent practitioners, rather than commercial providers, for this support, since they were seen as more credible. This created, in turn, incentives for secondary schools to co-operate around school improvement, even where levels of trust were lower.

How this was manifested locally was influenced by the history of local relations as well as political perspectives on how local schooling should be organized. Overall, LAs had less influence in the creation and maintenance of secondary clusters, although all four LAs were working to remain engaged with their secondary academies and to retain some level of local coherence as we saw in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, in the survey, only a third of secondary schools reported that their LA had supported the creation of partnerships locally, compared to half of primary schools.

Geography was also an influence on secondary clusters. The two smaller LAs in our sample contained clusters encompassing the majority of, although not all, local secondary schools. The two larger LAs had a diverse range of clusters. In Eastern LA, for example, the headteacher of an academy within a regionally based MAT reported chairing the local secondary cluster. Collaboration between schools in the cluster was relatively limited, but there was nevertheless strong engagement on issues of policy: for example, the cluster had been tasked by the LA to develop proposals for enhanced LA-wide Alternative Provision. In Western LA, nine schools had formed what they referred to as a soft federation – called Coalition – that included 'local' schools up to 25 miles apart. A formal agreement on shared governance had been established, setting out how joint work would be decided upon, funded and staffed, with a shared commitment to ensure that all schools in the cluster would be at least Good in Ofsted terms. One example of joint work across Coalition involved schools working in triads to peer review their provision for disadvantaged students, leading to joint action research projects. However, the headteacher who chaired the partnership noted that member schools had neither the remit nor the capacity required to support member schools that were really struggling in terms of measured performance.

By comparison, in one of the smaller LAs, ten secondary schools no more than five miles apart had sustained a long-term cluster – 'STARS'. An

important first step, before 2010, had been the development of sixth forms in each secondary school. This had been fraught at the time, but had ultimately helped the schools to attract additional students from neighbouring LAs and thus reduce a surplus of places locally (while worsening them elsewhere). The schools then began to co-organize staff CPD, and this collaborative work gradually evolved into an 'improvement framework' that centred on a 'best practice directory' and a peer-review process. After 2010 the majority of schools had converted to academy status, individually but at the same time collectively employing a consultant, as one headteacher put it, for 'all of that legal nonsense' involved in conversion. A common purchasing agreement was also developed, through which the schools negotiated prices with potential service suppliers before then signing individual contracts.

For STARS, the development of a Teaching School Alliance (TSA) was – the headteacher of the Teaching School argued – a 'natural progression', since the schools were already working together on several TSA policy aims (discussed below) and STARS had a history of searching out and benefiting from the preferential funding often associated with early adoption of external initiatives. Politically, the schools were broadly positive about the idea of autonomy from the LA, independently responsible for their own improvement, but with a commitment to what we might call 'co-operative self-improvement'. As we shall see in the next section, however, there were tensions underlying this arrangement that were exposed and deepened with the creation of a TSA.

Further, the viewpoint that TSAs were a natural progression for local clusters was not always shared. A substantial minority of our interviewees expressed scepticism about the motivations of Teaching Schools and about the policy aim to nationally designate local schools as lead organizations. As the chair of Coalition (described above) argued:

> I think I have some sort of fundamental philosophical problem with the idea of one school and often one person behind it, placing themselves on a pinnacle and saying, 'We know how to do this. We're going to help you out. … There's a lot of people around at the moment who really think they are quite something … the marketing that comes from them is very 'come and learn how to do this'.
>
> <div align="right">Headteacher, maintained secondary, Ofsted Good</div>

Teaching School Alliances: externally designated Lead Organization Networks

Introduced in 2010, the Teaching Schools policy replicates several features of earlier Labour-sponsored programmes such as Beacon Schools, specialist schools and the Leading Edge programme. A Teaching School (or schools[20])

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20 Schools can apply to become a Teaching School on their own or as a job-share (i.e. where the role and funding is shared between two or three schools).

is designated by government and is required to be 'outstanding in all areas'[21], so it can be described as an externally designated Lead Organization Network (Provan and Kenis, 2008). The policy clearly privileges the local status of one or more high achieving school/s, which was a strong critique of Beacon Schools (Fielding *et al.*, 2005), although the concept of a 'Teaching School Alliance' and 'strategic partners' seeks to give more prominence to the intended network around the lead organization. The role expected of Teaching Schools is substantial, including Initial Teacher Training, school-to-school support and CPD and leadership development.[22]

The first wave of 100 Teaching Schools was designated in 2011 and by 2017 there were more than 750 TSAs operating nationally. Gu *et al.* (2015: 51) found in a formal evaluation of Teaching Schools that there is 'considerable' regional variation and 'a clear tendency that low reach areas are generally away from major cities'. There is also a clear over-representation of secondary schools and schools with less deprived intakes in the Teaching School cohort as a whole.

Gu *et al.* (2015: 180) conclude that Teaching School Alliances can be conceived as 'loose partnerships' that rely on 'like-minded people' working together through a process of 'give and take' to develop collective and collaborative intellectual and social capital for improvement. Our findings suggest that this presents a somewhat idealized view: while there were often webs of inter-connected schools working together within the TSAs we visited, Teaching Schools were also 'providers' of services, such as CPD programmes, which other schools purchased as 'users'. At the same time, some lower-performing schools were effectively directed to become recipients of grant-funded provision from Teaching Schools. In these ways, TSAs faced competing pressures of hierarchical and market governance that influenced their development as networks.

Partly as a result of these pressures, we found that existing local partnerships or clusters that chose to make a TSA application were often changed as a result. The relatively non-prescriptive and voluntary nature of the initiative left scope for local adaptation and variation. Within our localities, TSAs faced common tensions in: whether to develop as equitable or hierarchical networks; whether to allow inclusive or exclusive membership locally; and whether to prioritize reciprocal or marketized relations. We illustrate these tensions by describing three common trajectories that TSAs were adopting – as *hierarchical*; *exclusive*; and *marketized* networks – although we note that, in practice, TSAs often reflected hybrid forms.

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21 The application process for Teaching Schools is conducted by central government. Recent application waves have been targeted by the DfE at specified low reach areas, linked to 'Opportunity Areas'. Some aspects of the designation criteria have been changed to allow for a wider group of entrants. Details on the 2017 designation criteria for new Teaching Schools can be found here: www.gov.uk/guidance/teaching-schools-a-guide-for-potential-applicants (accessed 7 June 2017).

22 Teaching Schools were initially expected to work across six areas, but these were merged into three in 2015.

i) Hierarchical, but inclusive network

In the STARS collaborative, described above, the designated Teaching School head described the TSA as a 'natural progression'. For two other schools in STARS, however, the TSA had quickly deepened asymmetric relations – that were previously managed through, as one head argued, 'an implicit agreement that we would act collegially'. From this perspective, the TSA allowed three 'powerful schools' to take on lead positions and gain disproportionate influence. As new TSA activities were layered on top of existing ones and the Teaching School and two other schools took on the leadership of these activities, processes of decision-making began to take on a more hierarchical structure. One headteacher critiqued these changes as follows:

> It was Hargreaves who talked about many tribes, 'schools are members of many tribes' – that's fine, but quite often, when you're a part of many tribes, the Venn diagram nature of your relationships is sometimes with one circle over there and a couple overlapping. But the model [here] is one stacked on top of the other, kind of like an ever-winding circle. And that has threats, that essentially [the Teaching School] have, in the teaching school alliance, replaced the local authority's secondary school improvement arm, and they're charging us thousands of pounds to get stuff that we used to get for free. And they are gaining – and we are part of that.
>
> Principal, secondary converter academy, Ofsted Outstanding

The TSA had appointed an alliance director to co-ordinate the TSA's activities – which included an expanded CPD and leadership development programme and a formalized peer-review process. To fund this, STARS schools paid an annual membership fee of £5,000. In this process STARS was argued to have become more transactional, rather than participative and innovative, with school-to-school support now paid for rather than collaborated on, and with 'a sense of "Ofsted-i-ness"' about the peer-review process. One headteacher argued that this reflected a more general weakness in the TSA model nationally, that it could 'embed hierarchies' and 'exclude some and allow others undue influence':

> 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 taking the best teachers that come through that process, to support your school?
>
> Principal, secondary converter academy, Ofsted Outstanding

The sense of increased hierarchy and formality had developed into a more significant split between members of the STARS collaborative. One of the two schools that were vocal in critiquing the TSA had been 'until recently,

routinely at the bottom of the league tables'. The school had rapidly improved and gained an 'outstanding in all categories' judgement in a recent inspection. It had applied and been designated as a Teaching School itself. The hope, the headteacher argued, was to develop a different approach, focusing on pedagogy and practitioner-led research, rather than replicating external Ofsted judgements. However, as the head acknowledged, the new TSA was seen as a challenge by the existing Teaching School, with the future of STARS as an LA-wide collaborative in doubt as a result.

ii) Exclusive, internally equitable network

A second approach had been developed by five neighbouring 'high-performing' primary schools. All five had been part of a larger local cluster of schools before 2010, but had wanted to organize a peer-review process after 2010 in order to replace the disappearing local authority advisor team. This had, however, been resisted by the six other (generally lower attaining) schools in the cluster. The headteacher of one of the five TSA schools argued that: 'Literally, as soon as we mentioned doing inspections in each other's schools, the room just divided in two, from "over my dead body" to those which were, "fine"'.

The five schools decided to progress peer-review among themselves and subsequently applied together to become a TSA, with one school meeting the Teaching School eligibility criteria and the other four named as strategic partners. Within the TSA – called SUCCESS – the headteacher argued that relations had remained relatively equitable, with shared decision-making, no dedicated TSA manager and each school leading on an aspect of the 'Big Six', with research and development a shared theme. The schools had agreed a common approach to assessment without levels and moderation, while joint professional development and subject networks had been created for staff. The schools had, it was argued, built trust by sharing student data and agreeing shared priorities for improvement.

Externally, however, the TSA was exclusive. The headteacher explained that other local schools now wanted to join the alliance, but the five members 'didn't want too many voices around the table': 'It's a more closed shop than it used to be'. The original larger cluster group did still meet, but its attendance was poor and 'there's a lot more suspicion than there has been in the past. The temperature drops by about 30 degrees as soon as you mention [the TSA]'. The headteacher admitted to feeling deeply conflicted by the way the partnership had developed, but argued that it was the only pragmatic response possible in the context of the wider government-imposed policy framework:

> 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. And we know that they're there. 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 five strongest schools in [the cluster] formed SUCCESS. And that was to our shame, a little bit, I think, that the egalitarianism stopped.
>
> Headteacher, maintained primary, Ofsted Good

A recent development was that as an LLE, the headteacher was now required by the TSA to charge other schools for his time (where previously this was paid by the Authority and so was free for the recipient school). The headteacher was 'uncomfortable' with this, 'but we have been told, "You must not deviate from this funding model."'

iii) Marketized network of providers

These emerging procedures for selling support were much more advanced in 'Exchange', which exemplified a third approach to organizing a TSA. Uptown Teaching School had developed the TSA as a network of school improvement providers straddling four LA areas. There was little aspiration for collaborative and reciprocal relations, other than strategic partners providing placements for and gaining access to the Teaching School's SCITT. Rather the TSA was conceived as a loose affiliation, with strategic partners – all Outstanding or Good schools (at the time of the research) – focused on selling short-term support services to predominately external 'client' schools. To organize the TSA as a commercial provider, the Teaching School had developed a framework of rules and regulations. All services bought and sold under the Alliance brand had to be directed through the Teaching School's contract team and use the Alliance's terms of sale. There was a price structure of daily rates for contracting a headteacher or an SLE and client schools had to pay a surcharge of 12.5 per cent to the Teaching School for facilitation and administration.

One of the headteachers of a strategic partner school we interviewed described the TSA as 'very much a purchasing model'. The school had bought support from SLEs at the Teaching School on three occasions, with the deputy head reporting that an SLE would typically: 'see the teaching, go through the data, probably with me and the head of department, because what we're looking for is some quick fixes as well as some more durable ones we can roll out next year'. The school had also sold services through the TSA platform, which had helped to fund the inward purchasing of support and a factional 'over-staffing' of middle leaders in the school.

In this model there was little responsibility for either the client school or whether the purchased support had an effect. Within the TSA there was some disquiet about the unequal nature of relations within the SCITT, which was based at the Teaching School, but as strategic partners the schools benefited from the marketing exposure and 'brand' association of the TSA – which was marketed through tailored websites for both school-to-school support and ITT. The Teaching School was understood to be building and managing a sub-regional market place, from which it accrued economic, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Teaching School 'business models' and moves towards MATs

These three trajectories – towards hierarchical, exclusive and marketized TSAs – can be partly understood in relation to what some respondents called the 'business model' of TSAs. Glover *et al.* (2014) provide a perspective on this in their review of 'TSA business models' for the DfE, arguing that Teaching Schools are influenced, simultaneously, by the need to: i) make sufficient income to be financially viable; ii) meet the real needs of other schools; and iii) 'deliver' policy priorities set for them by government. The Government's 2010 White Paper was clear that core funding for Teaching Schools would be minimal, with a requirement that they sell services to other schools to remain viable. But, of course, the need to sell services in this way can detract from the ability of Teaching Schools to shape equitable partnerships or to meet the real needs of other schools. As core funding reduced, Teaching Schools faced a need to become ever more commercial in order to remain sustainable, as this TSA Director observed:

> I think the sustainability as well is something that's on everybody's mind, so certainly for us, it's about thinking in a more business-like way … . In terms of commercial work as well and building that sustainability for the future and not living in the present … So, you need to think about how you're going to generate income through work that you do for other schools that is going to make you sustainable into the future.

In this context, leading an externally designated Lead Organization Network while also trying to balance Glover *et al.*'s three demands created significant challenges for Teaching Schools. We outlined these in Chapter 3, where we discussed the ways in which such designated system leaders are sometimes seen as a co-opted elite by their peers. We also highlighted two other concerns raised by Teaching School leaders themselves in that section: that they and their schools lacked the capacity or perceived authority required to intervene and address the needs of local schools and that they risked a drop in the performance of their own 'home' schools if they focused too much time and energy externally. Further, the policy context was seen to have changed – with much greater expectations on impact, over shorter time periods. The result was intense pressure on Teaching Schools, coupled with a realization that the resources that they could draw on were not sufficient to the task, as one Teaching School headteacher commented: 'I think we've found already, we haven't got the capacity for half of the work that's needed in the city at the moment. We've got nine SLEs – it's not enough.' Another Teaching School headteacher reported having withdrawn support from a school that they had been asked to support:

> I'll tell you what has changed. This last two years has felt like nothing I've ever experienced before. The high-stress, high-stakes, in terms of the accountability system … That's what has changed, the complexion of that has changed beyond all measure, I think … you are taking an amount of money to help, if you like, fix a problem, and you can't fix it,

> you feel obliged, somehow, to always show that there is improvement, improvement, improvement. And in this instance, I can't. I can say there's been limited impact, but that's not what anybody wants to hear, really. They want to know that I can go in and change the world and fix it; but I couldn't, and I can't.
>
> Principal, secondary academy, Ofsted Outstanding

These pressures were leading many of the Teaching School leaders in our sample to re-evaluate whether and how to continue in the role. A minority were choosing to step back from their externally facing work and refocusing their attention on their home school 'because the pressure to keep Outstanding is huge'. More common was a view that the way to secure financial stability and to manage the demands of the accountability system was to form or lead a MAT. Such a move need not mean stopping as a Teaching School, indeed many MATs also operate as a TSA. Nevertheless, as one Teaching School headteacher argued:

> The problem is, the Teaching School, you don't know where your next meal's coming from, do you? So I would say for security, the multi-academy trust is a safer bet, really, because of the year on year nature of Teaching Schools.
>
> Principal, secondary academy, Ofsted Outstanding

In addition to the somewhat greater financial security offered by MAT status, a trust was also commonly seen to offer a much stronger level of control over member schools in the context of a sharp accountability framework. Or, as one RSC interviewee put it, in MATs there are: 'extra, um, levers, magnets to be able to do what you really want to do. *You've got effectability*' (sic – emphasis added).

Multi-academy trusts

There are of course a variety of pathways into a MAT – by schools creating MATs, by schools being forced into MATs and by schools joining MATs through choice or without direct compulsion. In this section we explore this emergence, first from the perspective of the legal basis of MATs and how MATs have been encouraged to grow in policy guidance, drawing on our RSC interviews in particular. We then set out the headlines from our quantitative analysis of MATs, including their impact on student attainment by size of MAT. Finally, we explore the interpretations of school leaders around why and how MATs are developing locally and on the influences MATs are having within and on local school systems.

Are MATs partnerships?

MATs are commonly referred to as a form of partnership. For example, the House of Commons Select Committee (2015: 35) argued that: 'In an autonomous system, collaborative partnerships are seen as essential in

order to provide challenge, expertise and economies of scale. MATs are one form of such partnerships'. We argue this is an inappropriate use of the term 'partnership' given the common definition of partnerships supplied above ('legally autonomous organizations that work together'). As the DfE (2016c: 2) has set out, a MAT is a charitable company that has: 'a single set of articles and therefore is a single legal entity accountable for a number of academies'. A central board of trustees is responsible for governing academies within a MAT and, crucially, each academy is not an independent entity but rather a unit of delivery within the larger hierarchical structure. Further, an academy cannot choose to leave a MAT of its own volition and it is for the MAT board to decide what powers, if any, are delegated to a member academy's local governing body. This is true whether the school is a converter or sponsored academy.

So, rather than partnerships, we argue that MATs are best understood in terms of 'mergers and acquisitions'.[23] A merger can be negotiated (i.e. for converter academies), whereas an acquisition or 'take-over' is often hostile (for sponsored academies), but crucially in both cases all properties of the 'targeted' school(s) are transferred into the central trust and the 'non-surviving' organization no longer exists (Hawkins, 2005: 40). MATs are both charities and companies, so their governance model draws on the voluntary as well as the private sectors. However, as a number of observers have highlighted, the influence of business models and the language in MAT policy and practice has clearly emphasized private sector and corporate structures (Glatter, 2017; Courtney, 2016; Wilkins, 2014), for example in promoting corporate boards, executive leadership, standardized approaches and a wider encouragement for MATs to be 'learning from business' (DfE, 2016b: 24).

Encouraged to develop in these ways, MATs have been positioned as a 'generic solution', not only to under-performing schools, but potentially for *all* schools, which stand to benefit from economies of scale, efficient use of resources, effective management and clearer oversight – a need created, ironically, by the roll back of Local Authorities. Yet, as has long been recognized in the literature on the private sector, claims about the positive effects of corporate mergers and acquisitions are often wildly over-estimated (Caves, 1989; Hawkins, 2005).

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23 This was the intent and was the language used by both the Conservative and Labour Parties in their 2010 election manifestos. Building on the existing 2002 Education Act, which allowed for schools to form (hard) federations, and referencing early innovators who had sponsored multiple academies, the Conversatives (2010: 53) stated that: 'any school that is in special measures for more than a year will be taken over immediately by a successful academy provider'. The Labour Party (2010: 3.3) stated that 'through mergers and take-overs' up to 1,000 schools would be 'part of an accredited school group by 2015 – a new generation of not-for-profit chains of schools with a proven track record'.

MATs as hierarchies

Cases of academy 'failure' within MATs, whole 'MAT failure', poor financial management and inappropriate vested interest in MAT boards have been widely reported (Greany and Scott, 2015; Savage and Mansell, 2018).

In response the government has developed new policies and guidance over time. One clear trend has been towards a tighter level of prescription over how MATs structures must operate, with a move away from flexible models (such as Umbrella Trusts[24]) and a requirement for tight vertical accountability, both within MATs and between MATs and the government. As one of our RSC interviewees explained, the government will now 'robustly challenge' MATs that do not have both a single MAT leader who is 'in charge' and a single governing trust board, both because this is considered 'good practice' and because the DfE needs a 'direct line of accountability':

> What *we are prescribing very much* is that clarity on the skillset that you need, at trust board level, but also *the leader* at what, what would be CEO level. Where we get [MATs] where that looks unclear, the executive leader and trust board, we will challenge robustly on that to be absolutely clear what the model is, because *we* need a direct line of accountability. (Emphasis added.)
>
> Regional School Commissioner

Despite this increased prescription, the government has stressed that there is no 'one "right" operating model' (DfE, 2016b: 9) for a MAT and that a scheme of delegation allows for variation in how they are organized and governed,[25] but any such variation must nevertheless be granted from above, with formal authority held centrally. The impact of this enforced hierarchical governance was visible within the larger MATs that we visited as part of our case study research, with a felt pressure for them to become more hierarchical and more prescriptive over time in the face of external pressure and accountability.[26]

The largest MAT we visited – National – was strongly hierarchical in its focus on results, but much less prescriptive in setting out how these should be achieved.[27] Formed before 2010 and containing more than 30 schools spread across the country, the MAT relied on vertical performance management to oversee its schools. We visited one secondary academy where we interviewed

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24 Umbrella Trusts allow for a greater level of independence for individual academies within a group compared with MATs. Umbrella Trusts were initially encouraged by the government after 2010, but RSCs do not now routinely authorize such arrangements.

25 ASCL, BrowneJacobson and NGA (2016: 24) note that the 'level of delegation may be proportionate to strength of the school – an "earned autonomy model".'

26 Our case study research was not designed specifically to analyse individual MATs, however, we visited a range of academies that were working within (n=7) or in the process of joining or forming (n=9) a MAT.

27 The data on National MAT is drawn from a visit to one secondary academy in the MAT. This included an interview with an executive principal who oversees two local MAT primary schools.

an executive principal (EP) with responsibility for that school and two other local National MAT primary schools. The EP was sharply accountable for delivering results, primarily through their line management by the MAT's Regional Director. The EP explained that s/he made a 'big deal' about exam results, including through a relentless focus on them at fortnightly meetings with senior leaders in each school. The secondary academy had seen high levels of staff turnover (around 85 per cent) and rapid improvements in GCSE results over the five years that the EP had been in post. Having taken over responsibility for two low performing local MAT primary academies more recently, the EP reported employing a similar approach that was: 'a tried and tested formula … you leverage the results in year six'. Beyond this focus on test and exam results there was less evidence of the schools being shaped by a MAT 'vision' or improvement approach. INSET days and subject groups were offered by the MAT at regional level and there was some interaction with other MAT schools, but the EP was sceptical about 'collaboration' with other schools in general as 'it actually costs time and effort. … I think it's a potential recipe for disaster'. Instead of joining the MAT-run subject networks, the EP had instructed their subject leaders to attend subject meetings organized by PiXL, a national organization. Other local primary schools were reported to have 'refused' to work with the MAT, while relationships with local secondaries were described in terms of sharp competition, so the three schools were essentially operating as an outpost of a distant MAT.

By comparison, Regional MAT had tried to develop a more collaborative culture between its member schools.[28] The MAT was responsible for more than a dozen primary and secondary schools in one region, the majority of which had been taken over as sponsored academies serving disadvantaged areas. The MAT's CEO argued that this focus on disadvantage had helped to create a shared ethos among staff, with regular MAT-wide professional development days and academy leaders agreeing to let experienced staff work at other schools at short notice. It was notable, however, that these shared values were particularly central for a small group of leaders who had worked in the MAT from the outset and had then populated senior posts as the MAT grew. As one of these leaders acknowledged, relations were 'much less strong at other (MAT) schools'. The CEO also identified how recent growth in the size of the MAT had been 'bumpy' and that the MAT was under pressure to rapidly improve student attainment and progress. As a result: 'There was, I suppose, an identity crisis.' The MAT had responded by establishing 'executive' posts, between the CEO and academy principals, to 'challenge and support' schools. There was also more prescription, with all schools required to adopt the same curriculum in English and Maths and to participate in standardized tests to 'benchmark performance'. This 'greater standardization', the CEO argued, was what 'successful' MATs do, and so there was a need to bring more 'hard edge' into the MAT, with any 'school autonomy' needing to be 'earned':

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28 The data in this vignette is drawn from ten interviews, including with the CEO, and two visits to schools in the MAT.

> We know that some of the most successful [MATs] don't muck about
> with thinking about autonomy. Let's not kid ourselves. We're not in this
> to be autonomous. It's plan A, and that's what everybody does. And
> you can scoff and think 'what about creativity and innovation?', but,
> ultimately, it does make them very successful in some ways. But there's
> a hope that if you we were able to harness that collaborative spirit that
> we have, together with some of that more hard-edged – but we're only
> going to do the things that really work, and we can see that, or we're
> only going to allow those people to do it because they have a track
> record of doing it, and then increasingly that will be a feature of what
> we do I think.
>
> <div align="right">Regional MAT CEO</div>

MAT size – pressure to achieve economies of scale

The notion that these developments were a response to 'bumpy' growth
relates to the second set of policy priorities for how MAT structures should
be developed. This concerns the size of MATs. For Sir David Carter (2016:
28), the National Schools Commissioner, the message is clear: 'we need
our existing MATs to grow'. The government, that is, needs MATs to take
over 'failing' schools and academies, but also, Carter argues, MATs need
to grow 'to be sustainable'. MATs need to be a 'minimum size' that can be
calculated, Carter argues, in economic terms from: the pupil income for the
trust, the 'contribution to running the central team and support structure',
and by considering 'what are the services you want to provide at the core of
the trust?' (p.24). However, following persistent challenges with MATs that
were seen to have grown too quickly after 2010, Carter also argues that a
shift in policy is needed towards more gradual 'growth with care' (p.28).
As one of our RSC interviewees argued, however, it is in fact the 'system's
needs' for MAT growth and the high levels of failure seen in larger MATs
that have often been intertwined:

> The mistakes have been made around over ambitious growth that has
> not been built on solid foundations. Sometimes that's not necessarily the
> fault of the trust, but that's been the system's needs that it meant we have
> not built capacity quickly enough, so that the same trust has been called
> upon each time to provide support.
>
> <div align="right">RSC</div>

It is notable that changing policy on these issues has been the responsibility
of unelected ministers, made Lords – Hill, Nash and Agnew[29]. The handover

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29 Following on from Lord Adonis under New Labour, there have been three 'lords of
multi-academization' in the DfE since 2010: Lord Hill, a PR consultant and long-term
Conservative political advisor; Lord Nash, a venture capitalist and sponsor of Future
Academy Trust, which runs academies in central London; and Lord Agnew, a CEO of
both insurance and outsourcing companies, sponsor of Inspiration Trust with academies
in East Anglia, former chair of the DfE Academy Board and a trustee of the Policy
Exchange think tank.

between each of these ministers has marked a shift in MAT policy: Lord Hill promoted a rapid expansion of large MATs working at national scale; by contrast, from 2013 onwards, Lord Nash increased central regulation of MAT growth, for example by introducing the RSC model and by encouraging the growth of smaller 'geographically focused' MATs, including in the primary phase; while since 2017 Lord Agnew has advocated the merger of small MATs together in the interest of financial viability, arguing that 'the sweet spot is perhaps somewhere between 12 and 20 schools, or something like 5,000 to 10,000 pupils' (2017 North Academies Conference speech). Lord Agnew offered no evidence for these claims.

Statistical analysis of MAT impact

The broader lack of evidence to support both the expansion of academies and MATs has been noted by the Education Select Committee (2015; 2016) and the Public Accounts Committee (2015). A number of statistical analyses of MAT and academy chain[30] impact on pupil outcomes and Ofsted results have been published, although these assessments arguably remain provisional given the complexity of academy arrangements (as a result of frequent policy changes) and the significant changes that have taken place in the pupil assessment and school accountability framework since 2010. Building on four years of analysis focused in particular on impact for disadvantaged students, Hutchings and Francis (2017: 5) conclude that there is significant variability within and between academy chains, but that 'the main picture is one of a lack of transformative change over the period.' This picture of variability between MATs, with no conclusive evidence that schools in MATs are performing better or worse than non-MAT academies and maintained schools, is echoed in a range of other analyses (DfE, 2016; Ofsted, 2016; Andrews, 2016; Education Datalab, 2016).

Our assessment of MAT impact provides an original analysis by matching a sample of schools in multi-academy trusts with schools that have equivalent characteristics in a number of dimensions and then analysing differences in pupil-level outcomes at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 over a three-year period. The findings (which we publish in full in a separate, parallel paper[31]) show that, over a three-year period, there was no significant impact from MAT status for pupils in either primary or secondary academies when compared to pupils in similar standalone academies. When compared to pupils in maintained schools, we find pupils in converter academies in MATs do perform better than the matched sample, but there is no significant impact from MAT status for pupils in sponsored academies.

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30 Annual assessments of the impact of academy chains on outcomes for disadvantaged students by Hutchings and her collaborators include the small number of 'non-MAT chains', such as Umbrella Trusts, in existence. However, MATs are now by far the most common form of academy chain and so we use this terminology here.

31 This can be downloaded from the publisher's website at www.ucl-ioe-press.com/books/education-policy/hierarchy-markets-and-networks/

Furthermore, there are important differences between MATs of different sizes and across different phases. After controlling for other relevant characteristics, pupils in small and mid-sized MATs tend to perform better, on average, than their peers in comparable maintained schools in both phases and, in the primary phase, than comparable standalone academies. Conversely, secondary school pupils in larger MATs (16+ schools) tend to do worse in terms of attainment and progress in comparison to both standalone academies and maintained schools. Our analysis did not allow us to understand whether there were particular types of MAT that made a positive or negative impact within these size bands, but the findings nevertheless raise questions around whether the current policy emphasis on encouraging MATs to grow on the grounds of economies of scale is justified in educational terms.

Further MAT impacts: fear, fragmentation and the formalization of local hierarchies

MAT developments were observed by many of our school-based interviewees with suspicion and sometimes fear. These concerns reflected a view that MATs are predatory and want to 'take over' schools by removing their autonomy and distinctive ethos through the imposition of hierarchical control. This view was often associated with larger, national MATs, but was also common among primary schools when discussing local secondary-led MATs. In the case of the larger national MATs, there was also a view that MATs would impose a narrow, instrumental curriculum and pedagogy geared towards improving Ofsted and exam results, to the exclusion of other student outcomes.

Several of the school leaders and teachers who expressed these views had direct experience of visiting or working in MATs, while others based their views on the experiences of colleagues, friends or family members who worked in MATs. For example, the maths co-ordinator in one primary school had worked in a school run by a national MAT, which she described as 'absolutely bloody horrendous', with 'a very top-down … approach' and 'bitter infighting' between senior leaders. An acting principal in a converter academy had spent time researching MATs that the school could join if absolutely necessary, but the process had been very discouraging. One MAT 'came to us, basically, with an offer that, if I was to paraphrase it, basically said, "We'll take you over", and we weren't interested in that offer'. A visit to another MAT had been particularly depressing, since it revealed a very narrow and unattractive school improvement philosophy:

> It's just shocking. There's no drama. There's no music. There's nothing out of school that's going on. The kids are all pinned in at break and lunchtime. It's efficient. They're in a lovely building and all the rest of it. I wouldn't want my kids to go to that school. They got the best results in [their city] last year, though, big improvement, everybody's happy, and all the rest of it. But they're also – and I cannot believe this – they're also effectively excluding kids, sending them home, and using

the code B 'educated elsewhere', because they're providing them with online learning materials … He was absolutely open, the head there. He basically said: 'Your good kids are going to do good everywhere. Your bad kids are crap, so we need to get rid of them. It's those middle kids that you have to worry about.' He was absolutely open. He said that in front of teachers, and there were schools there that loved it.

<div align="right">Acting principal, academy converter secondary, Ofsted Good</div>

For schools that felt vulnerable to external intervention these perspectives could drive a decision to form or join an alternative, ideally local, MAT, in order to pre-empt being pushed into an unknown national one. For example, we visited one primary school that had chosen to join a MAT led by a local secondary school. The primary school had been judged RI – from Good – a year before the case study visit and, with the roll back of the authority, the headteacher was keen to 'secure the future of the school', so that 'it's not dependent on me as a leader any more'. The school's governing body had agreed to join the MAT on the basis that the headteacher knew the MAT CEO and felt that there would be a 'good fit' in terms of the school's values: in the headteacher's words, 'We're interested in local solutions. If I'm really honest, what we're *not* interested in is national solutions.'

This suspicion of 'national MAT solutions' was also referenced by convertor academy principals who were active in creating new 'local' MATs, because: 'there should be local solutions to local problems and I feel very strongly about that' and that 'you will have authorities where the big chains have gone in, and we don't want that to happen'. These views were often presented as both a critique of, and a pragmatic response to, national policy:

> Whether we like forced academization or not, there is a case whether you sit outside of it and leave it to people who you consider to be predatory, or do you say 'we don't like the model, but let's get knee deep in it', in a way that sends out a clear message that your autonomy is valued, this isn't a clone.
>
> <div align="right">Principal, secondary converter academy, Ofsted Outstanding</div>

In these ways, 'local solutions' were often cast as 'offering alternatives' to intervention and hierarchical control. 'Local' MAT-building principals in our sample often stressed their commitment to: human-scale development and growth ('I wouldn't want to move too quickly too soon'), with an emphasis on equal relationships between schools ('we're looking at a lateral model, where you're having heads of equal status … there certainly isn't any desire, certainly for me, to go to the top-down model'). These aspirations appeared genuine, but respondents also tended to recognize that such ideals remained open to refinement and further doses of 'pragmatism'. Indeed, in practice, new MATs were quickly presented with 'opportunities' to grow by RSCs and other DfE brokers ('I was just asked about another

one'). As these local MATs began their own cycle of growth, and decided whether and which schools to 'take on', the work of principals became more concerned with 'the business side of things', where there could be, one secondary principal argued, early benefits that encouraged further hierarchical growth:

> There is so much benefit, particularly on the business side, because as we've developed, and I think our support staff structure has improved in the last year, so we now have an HR manager, we have a finance director. … We now have the same health and safety; we have the same catering – the procurement, on the business side, I think, makes so much sense … I think it's economies of scale. … It would be great if we got another primary school.
>
> Executive principal, primary academy converter, Ofsted Outstanding

For these reasons, claims that MAT developments were driven by 'moral purpose' was a complicated position to adopt and then sustain; not least, as one academy principal argued, because schools building MATs were often used to seek out comparative advantage:

> 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. Yes there's an investment on our side, but the system is important to us. Working with feeder schools, that might give us 30–40 kids who are [currently] in special measures, but might enhance our own attainment in the long run. Providing opportunities for staff that might otherwise go elsewhere, to engage them in system leadership helps to keep and develop our staff and prepare them for leadership. How a burgeoning reputation helps [staff] recruitment for us.
>
> Academy principal, secondary academy converter, Ofsted Outstanding

There was also recognition that MATs were contributing to two further processes in the systems we visited, albeit to differing degrees.

The first was that they further entrenched the local dominance of higher-status and higher-performing schools, because they tended to have converted earlier and were more likely to be approved by the DfE as a sponsor. In many cases this tendency overlapped with the dominance of secondaries over their feeder primaries. Local MAT building was not led exclusively by secondary schools, but in our localities the most common 'local MAT model' was of a secondary school-led MAT incorporating predominantly primary schools. This was occurring in a variety of ways, but initial growth typically involved the sponsorship of one or more lower-performing primary school. Meanwhile, the MAT was usually working to attract other local primary schools, whether as converter or sponsored academies. These efforts were by no means guaranteed though, due to the

concerns among primaries that we highlighted above about secondary takeover. For example, one secondary principal that we visited had approached his local feeder primaries to form a MAT, but his offer was rebuffed and the primaries subsequently announced that they were forming their own, separate MAT, so the secondary was now forming a MAT with another secondary in another LA.

Partly as a result of such haphazard developments, MATs were also contributing to fragmentation. The creation of MATs was seen widely to be accelerating the creation of different and separate 'groupings' of schools. In the context of STARS, for example, not only had rival TSAs put at risk the secondary collaborative, but the development of three local MATs (by the two Teaching Schools and a third school) had created new forms of competition. There was the beginning of a race to either take over or attract local primary schools into each MAT. One of these secondary principals recognized that the school was actually contributing to this local fragmentation into 'lots of little tribes and islands that are all working independently', but argued that the alternative, of being left behind with no local primary partners, was not an option.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the ways in which networks and partnerships have developed across the system, influenced by the roll back of LAs and a policy narrative that isolated schools are at risk. It has highlighted the continuing importance of local clusters and the ways in which LAs are working with them, particularly in the primary phase, to try and sustain coherence and improvement support, but also the challenges and inequities that this presents. It also maps three broad trajectories that Teaching Schools appear to be adopting, often in combination and hybrid forms, as they seek to navigate the complexities of shifting demands from government, the real needs of other schools, and the requirement for financial viability.

This chapter shows how and why schools are choosing or being forced to join MATs, but challenges the notion that such arrangements are partnerships. Instead, we illustrate how MATs are being incentivized and required to adopt hierarchical and increasingly standardized approaches that limit the autonomy and agency of individual schools. We also highlight the pressure on MATs to grow, but suggest that the findings from our statistical analysis of MAT impact, which indicates that only smaller MATs have a consistently positive impact on pupil outcomes, challenges this. Furthermore, we suggest that the somewhat random development of MATs is encouraging further fragmentation and the entrenchment of status hierarchies across the system.

Of course, while we have focused here on clusters, TSAs and MATs and described these separately, the reality is that the three models frequently overlap and interweave with each other across our four localities. In general the direction of travel appeared to be from clusters to TSAs and MATs, and we indicated some of the reasons for this, such as the desire for financial

security and stronger hierarchical authority among some TSA leaders. We also signalled the challenges that could be faced, for example when clusters tried to become TSAs and when TSAs break up into multiple MATs. The consequence of these shifts was that local networks of schools were being permanently changed, away from informal clusters and towards hierarchical, corporate structures. This could leave less well positioned schools with decisions about whether and, if so, which asymmetric 'grouping' the school should join.

Chapter 6
Conclusion

Our research questions for this project asked how school leaders are interpreting and responding to the 'self-improving school-led system' policy agenda and whether or not changes emerging at the local level represent a genuine basis for equitable and inclusive improvement. We also asked about the factors that support and hinder the development of 'school-led' approaches and the implications of this for schools and school leadership.

Chapter 2 explored the government's conception of a SISS as well as Hargreaves's (2012) idealized model founded on 'deep' partnerships, system leadership and a culture of co-creation and local solutions. We reviewed a range of existing evidence on the development of the system in England that highlights, among other things, the diversity of responses to change, concerns over capacity and funding, the risks of fragmentation and a two-tier system, and the national pressure for conformity and prescription.

We also identified two perspectives on how local systems might be reshaped as a result of these changes. The first sees local agency being fatally diminished in the face of centralization and data surveillance: a model of 'unbalanced' governance and 'highly centralized system steering' (Ozga, 2009: 149). The second allows more room for local agency, while acknowledging significant centralization: as power moves away from traditional democratic structures, space is created for the local to be remade by both new private and third-sector actors and existing public-sector actors willing to reform themselves (Lubienski, 2014).

Our research evidences how these moves are increasingly part of the same set of processes. At a local scale, the SISS agenda has encouraged a re-making of local school systems – with a sharp reduction in LA oversight and capacity and with new operational freedoms for academies. For a minority of schools and school leaders, in particular nationally designated 'system leaders' and those forming MATs, there is scope for new entrepreneurial agency and to influence and reshape local landscapes, albeit while being bound closer to the performance management of central government.

At a national scale, we have shown how the SISS agenda allows for hierarchical accountability and intervention to be intensified and the criteria power of the state to be strengthened, further constraining local professionalism and steering the system through 'coercive autonomy'. In the process, we highlight two particular ironies: first, that recent policy reforms have sought to move the system away from the original SISS agenda narrative of school-level autonomy and towards MAT-level authority; second, as MATs get larger, the number of managerial levels increases, meaning that LA 'bureaucracy' is replaced by another more complex and less accountable form of bureaucracy that lacks any local democratic mandate.

How these broad trajectories manifest locally is influenced by a range of factors, including prior processes of policy enactment (Ball *et al.,* 2012). What our analysis across the four localities reveals is that three factors do consistently influence local responses to change: the history of local relationships between schools and with the local authority and the ways in which these have shaped local provision; the context of individual schools and where and how they are situated socially, economically and geographically; and the agency of local actors, including their freedom and capacity to act and how this is informed by their personal and professional values.

Our analysis also sheds new light on the ways in which hierarchy, markets and networks intersect to influence change across different contexts. Our findings are unambiguous in illustrating the importance of Ofsted and the accountability framework in influencing the behaviour of schools, suggesting that hierarchy through accountability is more influential than either market-based choice mechanisms or the power of networks. But it is also more complex than this, because hierarchical governance operates in combination with market mechanisms to create such strong incentives for schools. This is illustrated by our analysis of Ofsted judgments and student composition between 2005 and 2015, which points towards the co-influence of Ofsted in shaping both parental choice and competitive practices by schools. These influences have clear implications for socio-economic inequalities, for example where schools that perform higher in Ofsted terms have become, on average, less deprived.

Turning to the question of whether or not 'deep partnerships' and inclusive local models of improvement support are emerging or not, there seems no doubt that partnerships and networks have become more important to schools since 2010, in particular as LA support has been rolled back and as 'school-led' models of improvement have become established. However, these networks are by no means an alternative to hierarchy and markets: they tend to represent local responses to those coordinating mechanisms as schools work together to respond to accountability requirements (for example through peer review) or form more or less exclusive clubs that reflect and protect their position in the local status hierarchy. The policy focus on centrally designating 'system leaders' and their schools is also creating an increasingly co-opted elite who are afforded opportunities to enhance their position within local status hierarchies and, increasingly, to embed this through the MAT structure.

In these ways the SISS policy agenda further develops and overlays New Labour's evolution of New Public Management and involves the government in meta-governance (Jessop, 2011), including as it simultaneously:

> › redesigns hierarchical governance, with more demanding accountability requirements and new regional structures that seek to more actively monitor and intervene into schools;
> › reshapes quasi-markets, with liberalized entry for new academy 'providers' and new incentives for schools to commoditize and sell 'best practices'; and

› restructures networks, with new nationally designated organizational forms and the contractual management of multi-academy trusts.

The overarching policy aim is to strengthen 'incentives for continuous improvement' to create a 'self-improving system' (Cabinet Office, 2006), but our findings clearly highlight the dilemmas of meta-governance. As central government works across this wide canvas of influence, it tries to manage a complex array of relations and to balance the tensions between hierarchy, markets and networks while also securing a level of fairness and equity, yet this is often prone to failure and ongoing searches for new temporary solutions (Jessop, 2011). As we have shown, this can lead central government to refine its policy objectives regularly and to increasingly coerce local change in order to try to 'get things done', in the process moving ever further away from the ideal of a 'self-improving' system based on lateral networks and towards 'chaotic centralization'.

Certainly, among our respondents there was a prevailing view that the school system has become increasingly incoherent since 2010, not least because the SISS agenda had set up a series of problems without articulating viable solutions, as the following quote indicates:

> '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 (original emphasis)

In addition to this incoherence, our school leader interviewees also often saw the SISS agenda to be problematic because of the incentives to act 'selfishly' in a competitive, highly regulated marketplace. For example, one of our interviewees argued that:

> We are quite fiercely sort of determined that we'll pick and choose on our terms. And that's all very well, but that doesn't naturally become an all-encompassing, self-improving school system ... It's selfish in a sense that there are a number of schools that I wouldn't touch with a barge pole either, to ask for support or to provide it if asked. Simply because there might not be the added value from those partnerships, they might take out of us more than they gave back to us and in the end – and this is perhaps pivotal, isn't it? – in the end my responsibility is still to this

> school ... I don't know how I go from being what I am now with the accountability I've got now to being that system leader.
>
> <div align="right">Headteacher, maintained secondary, Ofsted Good</div>

As a result, while some of our interviewees, in particular nationally designated 'system leaders', were optimistic about the potential for their local system to become 'self-improving', a more common view was that the SISS agenda was creating a fragmented system of 'winners and losers'. One deputy head used the analogy of the football leagues to describe this:

> I suppose it's quite frightening when you go down that track, because you've just got a system that will collapse without the LA, whether that will happen I don't know ... We'll probably be forced to join with a MAT down the line, so no matter how much you think you've got to give or how much we think we could benefit from that, if you're not a 1 [in Ofsted] you're not a 1. Then I wonder how much licence to improve you'll have. Because I suppose, to use a football analogy, it seems a bit like the premier league, where all the rich clubs will swim about at the top and all the poorer clubs will swim around below them.
>
> <div align="right">Deputy head, maintained primary, Ofsted Good</div>

What are the implications for schools and school leaders? On the one hand, in spite of the turbulent and chaotic context we have evidenced, the majority of our survey respondents (89 per cent) agreed that their school had the overall capacity it needed to improve over the next three years. However, this did not mean that schools supported current government policy. Half (53 per cent) of our respondents reported that they did not support the overall trajectory of current education policy, while only 20 per cent did (with a similar proportion in both primary and secondary schools). Further, a majority (56 per cent) of respondents did not agree that their school would have sufficient funding over the next three years to employ the staff they need (and just 19 per cent agreed).

Our findings also serve to illustrate the challenges for school leaders as they seek to balance the needs of pupils with the institutional self-interest of the school in the context of local and national landscapes that are frequently incoherent and increasingly unequal. Greany and Earley (2017) argue that policymakers often place conflicting requirements on front-line leaders who are expected to resolve, or at least mitigate, the tensions that arise. Further, as Newman and Clarke (2009: 127) observe, navigating and managing these policy-driven tensions can create 'personal, professional or ethical dilemmas' for front-line leaders. In our case study schools, active policy resistance was largely absent and school leaders tried to resolve these dilemmas often through 'pragmatic' compliance or, less commonly, 'passive' resistance, where they sought to hold true to their professional values and beliefs about education while mediating external change. Such passive resistance was generally only possible if the school was performing well above minimum benchmarks. Furthermore, such resistance often relied to

some degree on solidarity between schools within a locality: if one school broke ranks and started to adopt more self-interested behaviours then others often felt a need to respond in kind or face being disadvantaged in a competitive environment.

Four themes

We end by setting out four themes that emerge from the research and which, we argue, merit further focus and attention among policy makers, researchers and practitioners.

i) *A new economy of knowledge:* in the context of our findings that highlight the incentives for higher-status schools to codify and sell 'best practice' knowledge geared towards the demands of the accountability system, we ask how the system could be reshaped to encourage more effective and inclusive forms of knowledge development and mobilization.

Drawing on the research of Fielding *et al.* (2005), Hargreaves (2012) argued that joint practice development between teachers across schools offers both a model for professional learning and disciplined innovation and a way of building shared cultures and commitment to the success of all schools. The existing evidence on effective approaches to professional development and learning for teachers does not fully support this assertion (Cordingley *et al.*, 2015), but it seems unarguable that any school system (whether 'self-improving' or otherwise) must enable all teachers to enhance their professional practice in support of inclusive learning for students.

Throughout the report we have outlined examples of how schools, TSAs and MATs are working to support professional development for staff. Two observations stand out from this. The first is that very few of the leaders we interviewed appeared to have a clearly articulated approach for how they worked to identify, develop and share evidence, knowledge and/or expertise across their school/s so that it genuinely changed practice. Second, we identified three dominant approaches to knowledge mobilization – 'protect', 'sell', 'share'. We argued that the SISS incentivizes the 'sell' model above the 'share' one, for example in the way that Teaching Schools are encouraged to generate income in a competitive marketplace. Yet where knowledge and expertise are 'sold' in this way, there is a tendency to focus on the types of knowledge that can be easily codified and commoditized (as 'best practices'), rather than on the kinds of developmental learning processes that are argued to support professional growth (Winch *et al.*, 2015).

ii) *Fragmentation:* in the context of our findings on Ofsted and student intakes, we ask how could changes to the existing model of hierarchical and market governance, including changes to the 'middle tier' above schools, reduce the trend towards a system of 'winners and losers'?

The research revealed widespread concern that the system is becoming more fragmented; one interviewee argued that this is creating 'winners and losers' among schools. We have detailed specific examples of this: for instance, the schools at the bottom of their local hierarchies that struggle to

recruit students, or the networks that form between the higher-performing schools, but leave lower-performing schools out if they are not prepared to engage on the terms of the former.

These concerns around fragmentation often relate to the role of 'the middle tier' and how proactive it should be in securing a level playing field for schools. One premise of the 'self-improving' system agenda is that schools should be more autonomous, with existing bureaucratic structures stripped back. Yet if schools are left to find their own improvement solutions, then in a quasi-market context it is inevitable that some will have more capacity than others to succeed. Therefore we argue that the middle tier must play a mediating role – with sufficient formal powers to: create and enforce common ground rules, for example on local admissions; and to identify and support schools that are struggling to meet national performance indicators. Since this research was conducted, the RSCs have been charged with establishing sub-regional improvement boards to try and co-ordinate activity and to distribute central funding for school improvement, particularly in the government-defined Opportunity Areas. It remains to be seen how effective these sub-regional and area-based approaches will be, but they largely appear to replicate the existing 'school-led' approaches described in this report, albeit at a smaller scale. As we discuss below, we argue any new arrangements for the middle tier need to have a clear democratic mandate if they are to be seen as legitimate.

iii) *Equity:* in the context of our findings on the concentration of vulnerable children in the most deprived schools, we ask how could key aspects of policy on admissions and fair access be reformed and how could services for the most vulnerable children be reshaped to redress the trend towards further stratification?

Three themes emerge from our data in relation to equity across the system. Firstly, we noted in Chapter 3 the ways in which the accountability framework can encourage school leaders to place the needs of the school ahead of the needs of particular groups of, usually vulnerable, students. The recent debates about 'off-rolling' – essentially by excluding children, echoes this point.[32]

Secondly, local school systems remain highly stratified by socio-economic status. Chapter 4 explored examples of 'selective competition' by schools and outlined the analysis of Ofsted data, which showed the correlation between schools improving their Ofsted grade between 2010 and 2015 and relative reductions in proportions of children with free school meals in those schools.

Thirdly, support for the most vulnerable children is reducing, with a tendency for these pupils to become more concentrated in certain schools as

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32 See, for example, ASCL general secretary Geoff Barton's blog on off-rolling – www. tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-views/rolling-unethical-inappropriate-and-beyond-repugnant-consequences (accessed 14 January 2018).

a result of systemic pressures and practices and also for specialist educational support services to support vulnerable children to have been cut back.

We outlined some of the ways in which LAs in particular were attempting to co-design and enforce common approaches, such as fair access protocols and panels, as a way of ensuring that all schools, including academies, abided by their obligations. But these approaches were often seen to be 'sticking plasters' for a wider set of systemic issues.

Overall, two-thirds of our survey respondents (66 per cent) agreed that inequalities between schools are becoming wider as a result of current government policy.

iv) *Legitimacy:* in the context of our findings on an increasing local democratic deficit, we ask how could the school system secure trust among professionals as well as parents and students, and what might be required to create meaningful engagement for these core stakeholders?

This final theme is one that was rarely raised explicitly by our interviewees and the study was not designed to capture views from parents, so we raise it as one that is worthy of consideration, rather than as a direct finding.

Several observers of recent developments in England have raised legitimacy as an important issue for an academized system to consider (Gibton, 2017; Glatter, 2017; Hatcher, 2014). Without oversight of schools by democratically elected LAs and with the power of local governing bodies largely neutered in MATs, parents can quickly feel that they have no mechanisms to influence the schools that their children attend. Further concerns arise from the frequent scandals that have hit the academies sector, and MATs in particular, as a result of poorly managed conflicts of interest and other financial scandals (Greany and Scott, 2014).

These concerns can spread from teachers to parents more widely (Waslander, 2010). We note, for example, findings by YouGov, that there is shrinking support for academization among both the public and education sector. While 40 per cent of people supported the idea of schools being encouraged to convert into academies in 2011, by 2016 that support had fallen to 25 per cent with more people unsure. Among teachers, only 17 per cent asked by YouGov in March 2016 agreed that academization would make standards better; 48 per cent thought it would make standards worse (YouGov, 2016).

Final thoughts

We conclude by reflecting briefly on the significance of this research. First, it provides original empirical evidence in several areas, including from the analysis of MAT impact and from the exploration of Ofsted data, but also by combining the perspectives of multiple case-study schools in the same locality. Second, it challenges any simplistic reading of the policy narrative on a school system being 'school-led' or 'self-improving', including by revealing the dominant influences of hierarchical and market mechanisms

on the thinking and actions of schools and school leaders and the networks they are developing. Third, it provides a unique set of insights into how different governance regimes interact across different local contexts to influence patterns of schooling and school-to-school collaboration: insights that we hope will have relevance for research and practice on school system governance more widely.

Annex 1. Methodology

Ethics

Ethical approval for the research was secured at the outset from the IOE Ethics Committee and in line with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethics framework.[33] Participation in the research was voluntary and based on informed consent, with the right to withdraw at any point for any or no reason. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity in any publication or other output resulting from the research and some minor details of the locality descriptions have been changed or omitted in this report in order to ensure that they cannot be easily identified. The research also complied with the Data Protection Act 1998 by ensuring that all personal data gathered through field research or accessed through the national pupil database was stored securely.

Qualitative phase

Localities research sampling

The four localities for the qualitative strand were purposively selected on the basis of an analysis of nationally available data in autumn 2014.[34] Our aim was to identify two areas with relatively high densities and two areas with relatively low densities of academies and nationally designated system leader roles, such as Teaching Schools and National Leaders of Education, so as to research areas that had, on average, engaged differently with these core aspects of the SISS policy agenda. We also aimed to reflect national variation in levels of measured school performance, levels of deprivation and geography and LA type.

In order to do this we identified and ranked all local authorities in England according to the proportion of schools that had convertor or sponsored academy status (i.e. as a percentage of all schools in the LA); and the proportion of schools with formal system leadership designations (including Teaching Schools, National Leaders of Education and Local Leaders of Education). We also collected data on LA type (shire, unitary, Metropolitan Borough Council), externally measured school performance differentiated by phase (including percentage of schools judged Good or Outstanding by Ofsted and percentage of pupils achieving either Level 4 in reading, writing and maths or 5 A*–C including English and Maths at GCSEs) and levels of deprivation using the proxy of free school meals eligibility any time over the previous six years. From this analysis we selected

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33 See www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/BERA-Ethical-Guidelines-2011. pdf?noredirect=1 (accessed 26 February 2018).

34 In order to categorize LAs by the density of academies, we downloaded national data on all schools and LAs from Edubase in April 2014. This was then matched with nationally available data on Teaching Schools, NLEs and Local Leaders of Education, which was downloaded from the National College for Teaching and Leadership. Support for the LA sampling was provided by Dave Thomson, Fisher Family Trust.

four LA areas, two from the highest quintile and two from the lowest quintile in terms of academization and system leadership designation, while also seeking to ensure diversity in terms of the other criteria listed above.

The final selection comprised the four localities below.

Two localities selected from the highest quintile of LAs nationally in 2014 in terms of density of academy schools and density of nationally designated system leaders (e.g. TSAs, NLEs, LLEs)	
Brief description	**Additional sampling criteria in 2014**
1. Eastern LA 'Eastern' is a regional city that has experienced significant regeneration. It has above average levels of deprivation and ethnic diversity, but with significant differences between different parts of the city. (Two of the schools we visited were located on the outskirts of the city, but in a neighbouring local authority.)	- Above average levels of deprivation[34] (2nd quintile) - Below average performance at Key Stage 2[35] (5th quintile) - Below average performance at Key Stage 4[36] (5th quintile) - Average proportion of schools judged Good or Outstanding by Ofsted (3rd quintile)
2. Northern LA 'Northern' is a small suburban local authority within a large metropolitan area. It has low levels of deprivation, but notable pockets of higher deprivation. The locality has substantially above average ethnic diversity.	- Below average levels of deprivation (4th quintile) - Above average performance at Key Stage 2 (2nd quintile) - Above average performance at Key Stage 4 (1st quintile) - Above average proportion of schools judged Good or Outstanding in Ofsted (1st quintile)

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35 Percentage of compulsory age pupils eligible for free school meals at any time in previous six years, January 2014.

36 Percentage of pupils in LA that achieved Level 4b or above in reading, writing and maths in 2013.

37 Percentage of pupils in LA that achieved 5 A*–C including English and maths in 2013.

Two localities selected from the lowest quintile of LAs nationally in 2014 in terms of density of academy schools and the density of nationally designated system leaders (e.g. TSAs, NLEs, LLEs)	
Brief description	**Additional sampling criteria in 2014**
3. Southern LA 'Southern' is a small suburban local authority within a large metropolitan area. It has relatively high levels of deprivation and average ethnic diversity. The locality is characterized by de-industrialization and recent attempts at regeneration amid urban poverty. Alongside this, however, there are several 'leafy suburbs'.	- Above average levels of deprivation (2nd quintile) - Average performance at Key Stage 2 (3rd quintile) - Below average performance at Key Stage 4 (5th quintile) - Average proportion of schools judged Good or Outstanding in Ofsted (3rd quintile)
4. Western LA 'Western' spans a wide geographical area and includes large sparsely populated rural areas, dotted with small market towns, together with some urban centres. The authority as a whole has relatively low levels of ethnic diversity. Levels of deprivation overall are slightly below average, but with a significant minority of areas in the ten per cent most deprived nationally.	- Below average levels of deprivation (4th quintile) - Above average performance at Key Stage 2 (2nd quintile) - Below average performance at Key Stage 4 (4th quintile) - Below average proportion of schools judged Good or Outstanding in Ofsted (4th quintile)

Table A1: Overview of the four localities

School sampling in the four localities

We selected schools for case study visits in each area, aiming to ensure that we visited a representative range in terms of school type (convertor and sponsored academy, maintained, faith), phase (primary/secondary[38]); levels of deprivation and school performance (based on Ofsted grades and performance in national tests/exams). In each area we visited between 10 and 14 schools and, at each school, interviewed an average of 3.5 staff (and a range of 1 to 7 staff) including the headteacher and, depending on

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38 We visited primary and secondary schools, but not special schools, except one in Northern LA. The decision to exclude special schools was partly driven by resource limitations, but also by the advisory board's view that special schools tend to collaborate with other schools in unique ways, partly depending on the nature of their specialism and context, thus making it difficult to draw out common findings from a relatively small sample.

availability on the day, middle and senior leaders, teachers and the school business manager. In many cases we were able to triangulate perspectives between schools, for example by interviewing two or more schools that were involved in the same partnership. In addition we interviewed four or five 'system informants' in each locality, including the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC), Ofsted regional directors/senior HMI (SHMI), teaching and leadership associates working for the National College for Teaching and Leadership, senior leaders in the LA and, where appropriate, other key observers (for example, the leader of a local partnership).

Within each of the four areas, the sampling approach for selecting case study schools combined a mix of purposive, random and, in a small number of cases, snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was applied for categories of school where it was important to include such schools in the study design. This included nationally designated system leader schools and academies, particularly in the two localities (Western and Southern) where such schools were under-represented. Purposive sampling was also applied to other sampling criteria as required. For example, in areas where very few schools were categorized as Ofsted Requires Improvement or Inadequate, the entire population of these schools was approached. Random sampling was then applied for all other categories of school. Once we began interviewing schools, we also asked interviewees whether there were particular schools or system informants they felt we should approach because they had unique insights into the development of the local system, which led to a small number of additional interviews. Schools were invited to participate in the research by email and telephone call. Response rates were relatively low – for example, in Western LA we approached 94 schools in total, with only 14 agreeing to participate. The majority that responded with a decline said this was due to time pressures on school staff.

In total we conducted 47 school case studies, based on 164 interviews with a range of staff. We also interviewed 18 'system informants'. We set out below a short summary of the case studies completed in each of the four localities below.

Eastern LA

Eleven school case studies were completed – six primary schools, one junior school, and four secondary schools – involving 38 interviews in total. Nine of the schools were in Eastern itself, while two were in schools on the outskirts of the city but in a neighbouring LA. The schools reflected a range of levels of deprivation (from six per cent to 51 per cent free school meals eligiblity – FSM) and Ofsted category (Requires Improvement to Outstanding). Two schools were Teaching Schools and NLEs, one was an NLE and a further two were LLEs. Six schools were academies, of which four were part of a MAT. Two of these schools were part of the same regionally based MAT and so the CEO and Teaching School director of the MAT were interviewed in order to provide a fuller picture of how the MAT operates. One primary school was voluntary controlled. In addition, four system informant interviews were undertaken – the Regional Schools

Commissioner, a senior HMI from Ofsted, a senior leader from the local authority and a regional representative from NCTL.

WESTERN **LA**

Fourteen school case studies were completed in Western – eight primary schools, one junior school, and five secondary schools – involving 47 interviews in total. Due to the size of the county, we approached schools for interview in two separate areas, one rural and sparsely populated and the other semi-urban with higher levels of deprivation. The achieved sample was broadly representative of schools in the LA; for example, FSM levels ranged from four per cent to 33 per cent and Ofsted grades ranged from Inadequate to Outstanding. Western is one of the two localities with low proportions of academies and 'system leader' schools, so these were purposively sampled: one sponsored and three converter academies were included and one Teaching School, one NLE and two LLEs were visited. One primary school was voluntary controlled. In addition, five system informant interviews were undertaken: the Regional Schools Commissioner, three local authority representatives, and the NCTL regional associate.

NORTHERN **LA**

Ten school case studies were completed in Northern – six primary schools and four secondary schools (including one special school) – involving 37 interviews in total. The achieved sample was broadly representative of schools in the LA; for example, FSM levels range from four per cent to 42 per cent. Reflecting the overall high levels of measured performance in the LA, all schools in our sample were either Good or Outstanding in Ofsted. Northern is one of the two LAs with high proportions of academies and 'system leaders': we visited one sponsored academy and five converter academies and two Teaching Schools/NLEs, one additional NLE and one LLE. In addition we interviewed four system informants: the RSC; a NCTL TLA; a Ofsted regional director; and a senior leader from the local authority.

SOUTHERN **LA**

Twelve school case studies were completed in Southern – eight primary schools and four secondary schools – involving 42 interviews in total. The achieved sample was again broadly representative of schools in the LA; for example, FSM levels range from six per cent to 42 per cent, while Ofsted grades ranged from Inadequate to Outstanding. Southern was one of the two LAs with low densities of academies and 'system leader' schools, so these were purposively sampled: we visited two converter academies and one Teaching School/NLE and two LLEs. Two schools were voluntary aided. In addition we interviewed three system informants: the RSC; a senior leader from the local authority; and a local CPD provider.

Case study approach and analysis

The interviews were based on a semi-structured set of questions that were shared with interviewees in advance. Each case study headteacher was also asked to complete a pro-forma in advance, listing all the schools with which

it partnered in a meaningful way and to categorize these in terms of the types of partnership activity in place, the length and regularity of the partnership tie and their assessment of its impact. These proforma responses were then discussed and developed as part of the interview process. All interviews were recorded and the headteacher and system informant interviews were transcribed in full. These were used to write a detailed case study for each school. We then undertook a cross-case analysis for each locality, using a parallel inductive and deductive approach that was informed by the conceptual framework for the project, but that also allowed new themes and codes to emerge from the data. This work informed the production of four detailed locality case studies, which were then further analysed for overarching themes and findings as the basis for this report.

The national survey

The survey was conducted between October 2015 and January 2016 by an independent survey company (Qa Research), with the statistical analysis undertaken with NfER. A sample of 5,000 schools was drawn from all state-funded schools in England. The stratifying variables used in drawing the sample were: phase/sector, region, level of free school meal eligibility, and school (governance) type. The survey contained around 23 questions (with some routing to reflect differences between phase and school type), several of which included sub-questions, and three open-ended questions. It lasted approximately 20 minutes and explored leaders' views on, and responses to, each theme in the conceptual framework – hierarchy, markets and networks – and the themes that had emerged from the initial case study visits.

Six hundred and ninety-nine leaders completed the survey in total, mostly through a telephone interview (n=653), although with a small number of online responses (n=46). Responses were drawn from a random stratified sample of 5,000 primary, secondary and special schools, although a small number of the online responses came via an open email to ASCL and NAHT members. The majority of respondents were headteachers/principals (n=537), with smaller numbers of executive heads, deputy heads, heads of school, co-heads and other senior leadership roles. The characteristics of respondent schools are shown in Charts 1 to 4 below. Survey responses were analysed to identify differences by phase and size of school, governance type, Ofsted category, geography and level of deprivation. The primary and secondary school samples have a precision level of approximately 4.4 per cent. In practice this means that, for either of these samples, we are 95 per cent confident that for any quoted percentage the population figure is within a range of +/- 4.4 per cent. Weightings have been applied to the achieved sample based on school sector and stratification variables.

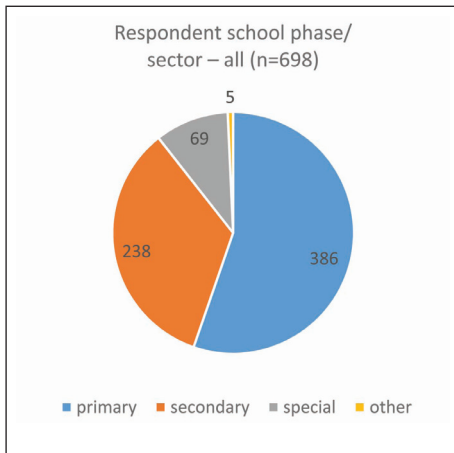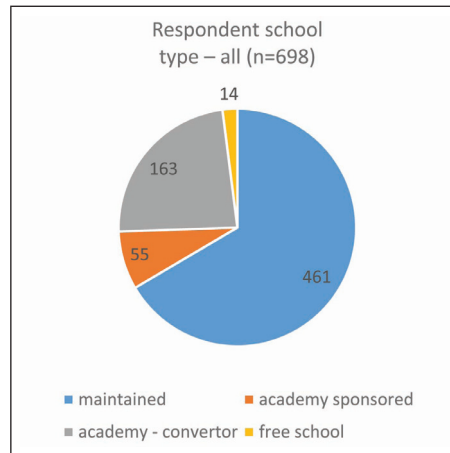**Chart 1:** Response by phase/sector

Respondent school phase/
sector – all (n=698)

5
69
238
386

■ primary ■ secondary ■ special ■ other

Chart 2: Response by school type

Respondent school
type – all (n=698)

14
163
55
461

■ maintained ■ academy sponsored
■ academy - convertor ■ free school

Chart 3: Response by Ofsted category

Respondent school Ofsted
category – all (n=698)

32
113
553

■ Ofsted 1/2 ■ Ofsted3/4 ■ Ofsted missing

Chart 4: Response by governance type

Responses by whether school was
in a MAT/federation (n=698)

5
157
536

■ standalone ■ MAT/FED ■ not available
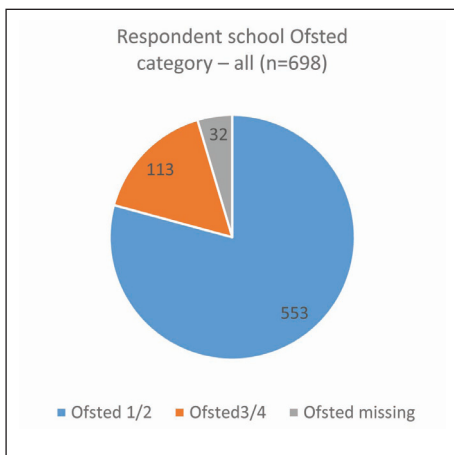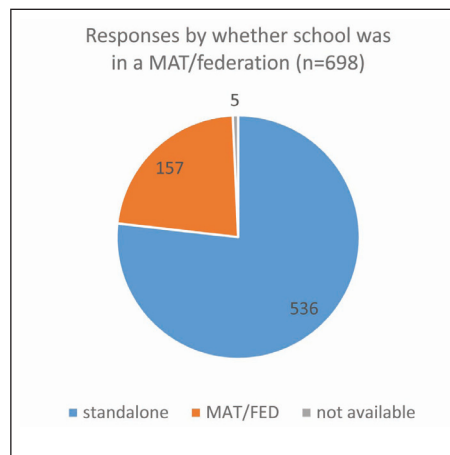
About the statistical analysis of MAT impact and Ofsted results

The analysis of multi-academy trust (MAT) impact on pupil attainment was undertaken with NfER. We compared the outcomes of pupils in schools that have been part of a MAT over a three-year period to the outcomes of pupils in comparable standalone schools. Using a propensity score matching (PSM) methodology, we created two comparison groups, a group of standalone academies, and a group of standalone maintained schools. The analysis used pupil level attainment and demographic data and then aggregated this to assess impact at school and MAT level, including by size of MAT. The headline findings from this research are included in Chapter 5, but for reasons of space the full research paper, including a detailed methodology, is published separately alongside this main report.[39]

The second strand of statistical analysis with NfER explored trends and patterns in Ofsted ratings, and how these related to changes in school

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39 This can be downloaded from the publisher's website at www.ucl-ioe-press.com/books/
education-policy/hierarchy-markets-and-networks/

characteristics over the decade 2005–15[40]. We used historic data on Ofsted ratings, from NfER's registry of schools, from the Ofsted website and from Edubase, and considered the latest available rating at each point in time. The Ofsted inspection and rating system was radically changed in 2005, and all open schools have since been inspected under the new regime. We also controlled for subsequent changes in the Ofsted framework during this period, including the introduction of 'earned autonomy' (meaning that schools deemed Good and Outstanding receive less frequent inspections) and reflected these changes in our analysis. We excluded from the analysis all schools with multiple predecessors. The first stage of the analysis looked at how Ofsted ratings have changed over the period. It showed how likely schools were to retain their grades, or to move up or down the scale. We focused on two five-year periods – 2005 to 2010 and 2010 to 2015 – and created transition matrices to show the likelihood of having a certain Ofsted rating at August 2015, given the rating at August 2010. We also estimated transition probabilities derived using a multinomial logit model to control for school type and changes in Ofsted regime. The second stage of the analysis looked at how the school socio-economic composition (proportion of pupils eligible for FSM) related to changes in Ofsted ratings over time. To control for FSM rates, we created five-year averages for the two periods, and looked at how these averages changed over the decade. In order to retain as many schools as possible in the analysis, we included schools with at least three years of data in each five-year period. The analysis looked at how starting Ofsted categories related to changes in the proportion of FSM pupils over the decade; and how the evolution of FSM rates ultimately relate to changes in Ofsted ratings over the decade.

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40 Due to space restrictions in this report we have not included the full findings from this analysis. We intend to publish further details and findings from the analysis in subsequent publications.

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