

Exploring governance in two chains of academy schools: A comparative case study

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Abstract

Although the number and size of academy chains in England is still increasing, the implications of these arrangements at a local level remain under-researched. This article reports findings from a comparative case study focusing on governance arrangements and sponsor involvement in two chains of academies. The findings suggest that the policy and practice of these multi-academy sponsors define the autonomy of the individual academies within the chains, so that the level of autonomy individual academies experience varies significantly between, as well as within, chains.

Keywords

academies, autonomy, chains, governance

Introduction

In recent decades England has made concerted efforts to reform its education system and since the passing of the Education Reform Act 1988 the pace of change has been relentless. The intensity and boldness of reform has led some American researchers to liken England to a real life laboratory (Finkelstein and Grubb, 2000). Recent reforms have involved significant interventions by successive national governments to break down traditional hierarchies within the system and to encourage greater involvement by the private sector in education. This dismantling of the system is most visible in the rise of academies, the English equivalents to independent, state-funded schools like America's charter schools and free schools in Sweden. Currently academies can exist, at one end of the spectrum, as stand alone, individual schools or, at the other, as members of chains of schools under the control of a strategic management executive comprising, for example, private sponsors or parental groups, or they may be participants in any one of a range of collaborative options between these two extremes (Chapman and Salokangas, 2012).

Since the introduction of the New Labour city academies programme academy schools have moved from the margins to the mainstream. Initially conceived as a solution to persistent under-performance in the most challenging urban secondary school settings, academies have come to be

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viewed by policymakers as a systemic solution that can be used to raise educational standards in primary and secondary schools across the whole system (Adonis, 2012; Gove, 2012). By April 2012, 50.3% of English secondary schools were reported to be either operating as academies, or in the process of converting to academy status (Shepherd, 2012). The number and scale of chains of academies has also grown and Hill et al. (2012) reported that over 48 chains of academies were responsible for more than three academies apiece. To date research has not managed to capture the details of these arrangements or the implications for emerging practice (Ball, 2011; Glatter, 2011; Hatcher, 2009).

Compared to American charter school research, which has reported more extensively on the development of chains of charter schools at national (Buckley and Schneider, 2007; Miron et al., 2010, 2011, 2012, Wilson, 2005) and local (Hill and Lake, 2002; Merseth and Cooper, 2009; Miron and Applegate, 2000; Miron et al., 2011) levels, the monitoring of developments in English academy chains remains limited. Our current understanding regarding chains of academies is largely based on the work of Hill et al. (2010, 2012) and their efforts to map the national landscape of academy chain provision. Other work that contributes to our understanding of national developments in chains of academies includes the research of Ball and Junemann (2012), investigating the relationships between governance and other stakeholders at the national level and Chapman et al. (2011) regarding the impact of federation on student outcomes. The research on which this article is based attempts to strengthen the research base by examining governance in two case study chains of academies, looking at the ways in which these arrangements were experienced at the local level by members of staff working in the academies.

The notion of the autonomy associated with academies is of particular interest in this research. Since the introduction of the city academies programme these schools have been associated with increased decision-making capacity, aligned with strong accountability (Adonis, 2012; DfE, 2010; DfES, 2002). However, as noted in recent literature (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2009), school autonomy is a complex and subtle concept and, as Glatter (2012: 565) put it, varying in nature and degree by context, activity (such as curriculum, assessment, resource management) and level. Research on charter school autonomy indicates that school autonomy varies significantly from school to school and depends on factors such as the school's authorizer, state legislation and the development stage of the school (Bulkley, 2004; Finnigan, 2007). This has encouraged us to examine the ways in which governance determines school level autonomy in English chains of academies.

Understanding Governance in Academy Chains

The research focuses on the models of governance within the case study chains and, specifically, the ways in which members of staff in their academies perceive the roles and responsibilities of chain and the sponsor and how they contribute to the work of schools within the chain. We draw on Mary Douglas' work on social construction and the ways in which individuals perceive their place within this construction. In her work, Douglas (1970, 1973, 1982) discusses the ways in which individuals' experience of a surrounding social construction can be organized on a two dimensional matrix depending on their perceptions of the surrounding social order. In this matrix the horizontal line stands for group ties – how strongly the individuals involved perceive the sense of group. The vertical dimension indicates the degree of social control within a group – the degree to which an individual 'is constrained not by group loyalties but a set of rules which engage them in reciprocal transactions' (Douglas, 1970: ix). Using this framework, the matrix used here (see Table 1) has a horizontal axis that signifies how strongly an individual experiences the sense of 'belonging' to

Table 1. Matrix for social integration and control.

STRENGTH OF CONTROL	High		
	Low		
		Low	High
		STRENGTH OF BELONGING	

a group (which in this research refers to the chain). The left side indicates a very low sense of belonging that becomes increasingly strong towards the opposite, right side. The vertical axis stands for social ‘control’ and indicates how strongly an individual is controlled by the group (the chain); this strength increases from low to high levels when travelling up the axis.

The matrix provided a helpful heuristic in understanding the academy-to-academy and academy-to-sponsor relationships within the case study chains, as the perceptions of staff regarding social integration and organization within the chain was reflected as notions of ‘belonging’ and ‘control’. This proved particularly helpful in examining the nuances of local autonomy and especially the ways in which school level autonomy in chains of academies is determined by the central governance of the chain. What follows is a description of the methods applied in this research and the ways in which we drew on Douglas’ ideas throughout the process of data analysis.

Methods

The aim of this research was to examine governance arrangements in two chains of English academy schools sponsored by charitable trusts. Two overarching research questions guided the inquiry.

1. What does it mean for teaching staff and school leaders to work in a chain of academies?
2. In what ways do sponsors govern and manage chains of academies?

This study adopted a comparative case study approach involving the collection of qualitative data through semi-structured interviews and documentary evidence from two case study academies. For the purposes of the research the sponsors are anonymized under the pseudonyms of Super Trust (ST) and Mega Trust (MT) and the academies involved have also been given pseudonyms. The case study chains involved are national in scope, each managing 15–20 academies across the country. Purposive sampling, based on geographical distance between the different academies, their headquarters and other academies in the chain, coupled with Ofsted ratings was used to identify three secondary level academies in each chain (see Table 2).

Table 2. Case study chains.

	Location	Ofsted
Super Trust		
Streetwood Academy	North West	Good
Gable Academy	Midlands	Outstanding
Brookside Academy	Midlands	Outstanding
Mega Trust		
Newby Academy	North West	Good
Lambton Academy	North West	A notice to improve
Parkview Academy	Greater London	Outstanding

Fieldwork for the study was conducted during the academic year 2011/12 during which 37 members of staff (four to eight in each school) working in different roles: support staff, teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders, were interviewed for 45–60 minutes each. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis included development of a list of codes and all data was coded accordingly in order to maintain consistency both within and between case analyses. Two-dimensional matrices were developed to identify emerging themes, patterns and trends (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In an attempt to understand better the ways in which sponsors are involved in academy-level decision making a coherent sub-case of each academy was formulated. In this phase of analysis, identified key themes were categorized in relation to the notions of ‘belonging’ and ‘control’. Themes describing academy-to-academy relationships, such as partnerships and networking, were associated with ‘belonging’, whereas themes describing academy-to-sponsor relationships, such as branding, centralized policy and top-slice, were associated with ‘control’. As becomes apparent in the next section, notions of control specifically assisted us in examining the nature and extent of school autonomy in the case studies.

The notions of belonging and control provided helpful conceptualizations in developing our understanding of the power relationships within case study chains as well of the ways in which the sponsors (and other academies in the chains) are perceived in each school. In the final phase of analysis each sub-case academy was located in the matrix in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between central governance and each sub-case academy.

Notions of Belonging: Within-chain Social Integration and Academy-to-Academy Relationships

Generally, the potential a chain offers for collaboration and chain-wide activities was considered a positive aspect of being a chain member and the possibility of building relationships with other academies was repeatedly mentioned as a key driver for joining the chain by staff working in both chains. However, all the staff interviewed shared a low sense of belonging and this was apparent in a noticeable absence of expressions of loyalty to the sponsor and to the chain in general from the staff working in these academies. Instead, the vast majority of staff in all academies tended to express loyalty to their immediate colleagues in the academies they worked in, not to the ST or MT, which were considered to be relatively distant from the day-to-day reality of the academies. Interviewees were more engaged in local networks than in the (rather loose) networks provided by the chains. Geographical distances were mentioned as an obvious challenge in building and

maintaining relationships between academies within the chain but, as all academies have access to modern technology and some of them operate in relative proximity, distance did not appear to be a credible explanation for the lack of stronger academy-to-academy links:

We have a huge issue in the northwest with gang culture, and therefore the collaborative work that we do has to be very clearly defined which makes everything in 14–19 challenging . . . I look into Super Trust, because what is exciting about it is that it's a national chain. I think there's so much that can be learnt from other academies in the chain. There's a real wealth of experience and opportunity, but currently we are not exploiting it, and to me it is a frustration. (Gable [ST], principal)

The staff involved expressed a general sense of disappointment regarding the lack of chain-wide activities to bring the schools together and create a platform for sharing practice. It became apparent that chains did not operate as networks of schools. Instead, a hub–spoke model, with the sponsor at the centre, prevailed. Therefore, the academies within the chains have not, as yet, seen significant benefits from being part of a national chain, although interviewees were aware of other chains that had managed to co-ordinate their networking and professional learning more effectively.

The few members of staff in both chains who expressed stronger group loyalties to the chain tended to be located towards the top of the organizational hierarchy. In MT, the senior leaders interviewed who had been involved in chain wide initiatives, for example on curriculum development or assessment, expressed more strongly a sense of belonging 'to something bigger'. They were familiar with 'friendly faces from other Mega Trust Academies', as the deputy principal from Lambton put it. However, such events bringing together MT senior and middle leaders were infrequent and, as such, not quite sufficient for deep integration.

In ST also, much stronger group ties were being developed among the senior leaders of different academies. Principals of the academies who were interviewed claimed they had developed a strong principals' network, which they used either to undermine or to support directives from the sponsor. This network was originally brought together by the sponsor, yet after few sessions the principals had taken the direction of the network very much into their own hands:

What the Super Trust actually have done is that they have recruited some really quite good principals. And we have bonded really well together. We share absolutely everything, data, everything. And that's something Super Trust didn't expect us to do but it has come from us . . . But I think the responsiveness of the sponsors and their willingness to do that, obviously they want our best, so if we tell them something they get it for us, they do it . . . We have a somewhat cynical view about a few things, like salaries shall we say, and other things. And when they've tried to take us a certain direction, we're simply just not doing it. (Brookside [ST], principal)

The assistant vice principal at Brookside reflected:

The heads work closely together, and I think the reason they do that is because they are resistant to being micro-managed and so, getting together, they work well like that. So rather than being told by Super Trust, that you are doing x, y and z, there is an element of, you know, the heads are appointed to make change in their schools, so they've become quite strong as a group. (Brookside [ST], assistant vice principal)

This ‘principal’s revolt’ was seen as a promising beginning in building and strengthening relationships between academies as, in all academies, staff expressed a great need and will to replicate the model of the principals network with other members of staff in order to create platforms for sharing practice across the chain. The network has also given principals a voice in the chain level decision making. All the principals interviewed referred to the network as a forum for discussion in which joint strategic planning occurs and in which principals’ voices are heard. The ‘united activism’ among the principals, to which the quotes above refer, suggest that they have a significant role in chain-level decision making.

The principals revolt was very much a ST related phenomenon. There was no sign of similar group activity among the MT principals who were more strongly managed by the sponsor. The relationship between the principals and chain central governance will be discussed in more detail in the following section, which focuses on the steering, guidance and control imposed upon academies by their central governance.

Notions of Control: Social Organization and Regulation by Mega Trust and Super Trust

Overall, there was a stronger notion of centralized governance in MT than in ST because the mechanisms put in place by MT’s central governance were numerous and extensive, requiring adaptability and compromise from academy senior leaders. ST senior leaders again spoke of a more collaborative culture, with academy senior leaders included in chain-level strategic planning. However, there were certain similarities in the ways in which social organization and regulation manifested themselves in both chains. First, branding provides an example of how strongly the academies are associated with the corporate image of their sponsors and the rest of the chain. There were some traces of branding present in all academies but, in general, the visual image was more strongly evident in MT academies, which were heavily branded, from logos on all printed material and the walls of the buildings to the identity badges of staff and the academies’ exterior signage. In two of the MT academy buildings especially, Lambton and Newby, the corporate colours were dominant in the interior design, with the carpets and furniture matching the colours in the sponsor’s logo. In contrast, there was less evidence of branding in ST academies, especially Gable and Brookside, as the principals were clearly hesitant to engage with chain wide branding exercises.

Second, all staff interviewed perceived new school buildings as a positive aspect of joining the chain was building of a new school building. In both chains, staff viewed the sponsors’ previous high level of political influence as an important factor in delivering a new build, especially as the Building Schools for the Future initiative had been abandoned by the current Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition government and many new builds were being cancelled or withdrawn. Participants from both chains shared the views of middle leaders from Lambton:

See, the building, we do really love it here, the staff, the kids. You should have seen the old one and you would understand. And had we not been with Mega Trust, I’m not so sure if we would have got it.
(Middle leader [MT], Lambton Academy)

A third key feature associated with being attached to the chain, although perceived more negatively than new building, was the financial relationship between academies and the central governance of the chain. The ‘top slice’ was considered a prominent feature of being attached to the chain and, especially among the participants from ST, its necessity was

questioned. As explained here by two principals, there was a shared consensus among academies that ST has not provided value for money and that the current funding arrangements were therefore unsatisfactory.

There is a permanent retention of 5%, that's still an issue. I've said to [the CEO], we are outstanding why do we still need to pay that 5%. We don't get 5% worth of services. We don't even get the people coming in helping us, because we don't need them. What we don't want in the group is the increased number of administrators and bureaucrats at the heart. There's a massive resistance from principals on that. All the 5% pays for, it doesn't pay CPD, is running the head office. (Brookside [ST], principal)

In a conversation I had with my Super Trust advisor, I said that in all honesty, I'm not asking Super Trust anything, I am paying into this, some time there has to be a conversation, either them costing their services and we buy into them, or an annual subscription and you top up on what you need, because currently we get nothing back. . . . So that's a big frustration with the top slicing. (Gable [ST], principal)

There was also general agreement among the ST participants regarding ways in which the top slice should be used to benefit member academies. Interviewees reported economies of scale and an effective centralized 'back office' resource as a key driver for joining a chain, and more specifically ST, instead of opting to become a stand-alone academy. Consequently there was general disappointment regarding the current lack of additionality and benefits of scale. However, staff working in MT academies generally had somewhat more positive views regarding centralized resources and there was a consensus that the sponsor had catered rather well for the material needs of its academies. Here a member of staff describes his experiences:

The shared resources are great. We went to Oxford with some kids from the academy and another Mega Trust academy. That was great, and we couldn't do trips like that on our own, hire a car and do all that, we simply couldn't afford it. So I think there's more finances available for that kind of thing in this academy than there was in my old school for instance and that's something other staff who've come from elsewhere would probably say too. So that's great about being in a group. (Newby Academy [MT], teacher)

The staff working in ST academies did not have similar experience regarding centralized finances and additionality, as a senior leader from Brookside explains here:

We thought at the time that Super Trust looked like a good model. There was a lot of talk about additionality. And I feel like that is something that has not quite materialized . . . I mean additionality in terms of contacts and funding; to really provide additional opportunities beyond education for the young people. And there hasn't really been that kind of additionality that we could bring kids elsewhere to learn . . . So that's something that hasn't really materialized. (Brookside [ST], assistant vice principal)

A fourth aspect was evident in the similarity of expectations in all academies regarding potential benefits of scale and how it could be utilized to support the development of teaching and learning and co-ordinate the professional development of staff. Of the two chains, ST was reported to be more sensitive to such needs and the interests expressed by academies, as ST senior leaders were more involved in chain level strategic planning and had more decision-making competence in both academy and chain-level policy development. Indeed the case study chains had adopted rather different strategies regarding chain-wide policies. The ST was portrayed as an organization with 'light touch' centralized policy and little, if any, centrally developed policy guiding members of

staff in academies. The policy guiding academy staff in ST academies was academy specific and, as one middle leader from Streetwood put it, 'I don't see any Super Trust policy documents that would tell me what to do.' Although centralized chain wide policies did exist in ST, the principals tended to be selective in their choices of which to introduce in their academies. In contrast, in MT, the centralized guidance was more detailed and rather intrusive, as described here by a member of staff from Newby:

There is a policy for everything in this school. The Mega Trust have a policy for absolutely everything. They're all online, I've seen them, I think they are on the Mega Trust shared area, so they're available. But you know, there's hundreds of them, I'm not kidding, there's so many. What happens here is that the Senior Leaders 'localize' the centralized policies, that's how it works. (Newby Academy [MT], support staff)

Participants from MT academies portrayed the chain as a 'policy heavy' organization, with a top-down approach to policy introduction. The centralized policy framework imposed upon academies was not the only sign of rather intrusive governance and management in MT, as the interviewees also spoke of the strong performance management, accountability and support mechanisms the central governance had adopted and introduced to the chain. An example of such mechanisms was the existence of a MT 'executive team' comprising a changing body of MT representatives as well as former academy leaders who had been promoted to across-chain roles and who at times, in academies identified as in need, took on executive functions. The following comment illustrates the role of MT representatives supporting Lambton Academy onsite:

So they [representatives of Mega Trust] come here and work with us, currently in teaching and learning, curriculum, and management, so all sorts really. They have all this guidance they bring with them. Some of it is really useful and has helped us to think outside the box . . . There's some pressure too . . . sometimes you wish there was more room for conversation. (Lambton [MT], assistant principal)

The fifth point to note is that the involvement and interventions of the sponsor in academies varied between and within chains. Focusing, first, on MT, sponsor involvement was visible in Lambton Academy as, during the fieldwork period, several of its representatives were working onsite in Lambton on a daily basis. Not all academies in the chain experienced high levels of MT intervention; it seemed that such resources were aimed at those academies in most need. In their most recent Ofsted inspection, Lambton had received 'a notice to improve', triggering the need for additional support from MT. No such involvement by the sponsor was reported by interviewees from Parkview Academy, which had received an 'outstanding' in its latest Ofsted inspection, as explained here by an assistant principal:

Since we got our Outstanding last year, the principal has been in a good place to be more selective. Her style is like, she reads everything they send [Mega Trust] and has a think about it, and then she says either yes or no. And I think her views are valued. (Parkview [MT], assistant principal)

The differences in perception relating to the control and regulation imposed by MT on academies are pronounced and may be explained, to some extent, by variations in academy performance and development phase and by the status of the principal within the chain. The dynamics in ST were similar as, although chain-level performance management and accountability mechanisms

were lighter and less prominent, those that existed were more visible in academies identified as in need. Senior leaders of ST explain the use of the ST scorecard (a half-termly self-evaluation process) and monitoring performance against chain-level league tables in their academies. The use of the scorecard and league tables were a ST requirement but, as illustrated below, it had been received with varying degrees of enthusiasm in different academies and actual use was variable:

Waste of time [the score card]. Complete waste of time ... means nothing. It's our headline figures and how we are supporting our students that matters ... We don't lose our sleep over it ... And the league tables, we don't really pay attention to it. Not really. (Brookside [ST], vice principal)

The procedures, so every half term I have to fill in the score card, which is basically a list of things which each academy fills in. First one I did on my own, now I've got a whole range of people involved. The first bit is about attainment against the national measures, then there's more specific parts, high attainers, under attainment, low performing boys, what are we going to do about them, issues to do with staffing, HR, all sorts as you would expect. I'm a very honest person and not very precious about it. Some other principals, mostly the more experienced ones find it a bit: 'why are they asking me about this or that, leave me alone', whereas I value it. Streetwood [ST], principal)

Evidence regarding chain-wide performance and accountability mechanisms suggests there was a strong sense of 'earned autonomy' (Beck, 2009; Storey, 2009; Whitty, 2007) in both case study chains and the adoption of chain-wide instruction followed a similar pattern in both. Those academies identified as in need were under heavier chain-level influence, whereas those academies identified as stronger were associated with more independence. Where the sponsor trust principals and key performance indicators were positive, the principals were given the space to lead their schools as they saw fit and match their planned change to their specific contexts. When this was not the case the ST education advisor and MT's executive team representatives could trigger external interventions from a range of internal and external sources. Of all the case study academies, Brookside and Gable of ST and Parkview of MT, had all been identified by Ofsted as 'outstanding schools' and their principals had an established track record of improving schools in challenging circumstances. This recognition afforded the principals the credibility and confidence to be more selective and challenging in terms of engagement with their sponsors. The academies under more scrutiny in both chains had a mixed history of performance and leadership, which is why they were monitored more closely. Streetwood (ST) was in its infancy, having opened in September 2011 as a school that was reconstituted from a local authority school with a mixed history. The principal was also new to the chain and while early signs were encouraging there was a feeling of being 'on probation'. Similarly, in MT, Lambton had recently replaced a struggling local school, had been subject to a series of changes in leadership and had received a 'notice to improve' from Ofsted, resulting in a heavy involvement by MT. Newby, a school with a 'good' Ofsted judgment was somewhere in the middle ground, receiving some MT support for leadership but not on the scale of Lambton.

To summarize the main findings related to centralized control, the key difference between the two case study chains were in the governance and management approaches the sponsors had adopted. MT had adopted more direct and intrusive 'top-down' approaches, whereas ST was more collaborative in its governance and management. In addition to these chain-specific differences, there were also signs of within-chain differences, as the sponsors were more involved in some academies than others. These relationships will be further discussed in the next section, as will be the implications these research findings have for practice, policy and further research.

Implications for Practice, Policy and Further Research

The findings presented in the previous section illuminate some interesting issues relating to governance in these case study chains of academies. This said, the extent to which findings from a small-scale comparative study of this nature can be generalized is limited. However, these instructive cases offer new and important empirical insights into the emerging structures and processes associated with academy chain governance. For the purposes of this article we, first, position each academy in terms of social integration and social control within-chain cases and, second, discuss the implications of these findings for theory and policy.

Drawing on Douglas’ ideas concerning group ties and social control proved helpful in analysing the academy-to-academy as well as academy-to-sponsor relations within cases. The findings suggest that all ST academy interviewees exhibited a low ‘sense of belonging’ to the chain. It also became evident that only a few ST control mechanisms and structures were in place at Brookside and Gable. Therefore, these two academies may be located to the bottom left corner of the matrix. In contrast, the Streetwood Academy senior leadership team was subject to more sponsor control and regulation, which is why it may be located in the top left quadrant of the matrix (See Table 3).

Table 3. Social integration and control in Super Trust.

		<i>SUPER TRUST</i>	
STRENGTH OF CONTROL	High	<i>Streetwood Academy</i>	
	Low	<i>Brookside Academy</i> <i>Gable Academy</i>	
		Low	High
		STRENGTH OF BELONGING	

Like the ST interviewees, all of the MT academy interviewees exhibited low levels of belonging to the chain. However, of the MT academies, Newby and Lambton exhibited higher characteristics of control than the Parkview Academy, as they received more external support from chain central governance. Therefore in a within-case analysis, the academies could be located to the matrix as follows (see Table 4).

Moving from within-case analysis to a between-case analysis, it becomes more problematic to locate the academies in the quadrants of the matrix as mechanisms, policies and procedures varied between chains. However, if we attempt to do so, rather than considering the quadrants of the matrix as tightly defined silos we could consider them as a spectrum or a scale. By doing so, the evidence gathered for this research highlights a common feature across all academies – the low sense of group membership and belonging felt by staff working in these academies in relation to the sponsors or to other academies in the chain.

Table 4. Social integration and control in Mega Trust.

		<i>MEGA TRUST</i>	
STRENGTH OF CONTROL	High	Newby Academy Lambton Academy	
	Low	Parkview Academy	
		Low	High
		STRENGTH OF BELONGING	

The evidence also suggests that sponsors utilized a variety of governance and management strategies within their academies that could be associated with control. There was variation both between and within chains and governance strategies, associated here with control, were generally more ‘heavy handed’ in MT than in ST. In addition to between-chain variation, within-chain variation also existed and was based on the status and development stage of individual academies. If all academies across the two case studies were located in the same matrix, they could be interpreted to appear as follows (Table 5).

Table 5. Social integration and control in case study chains.

STRENGTH OF CONTROL	High	Newby Academy (MT) Lambton Academy (MT) Parkview Academy (MT)		
		Streetwood Academy (ST) Brookside Academy (ST)		
	Low	Gable Academy (ST)		
			Low	High
			STRENGTH OF BELONGING	

As all the MT academies were subject to rather heavy-handed and rigid instruction from their sponsor, they would all be located towards the higher end of the control spectrum. However, as Parkview enjoyed considerable levels of 'earned autonomy' there was less sponsor control and regulation there than in other MT academies. In comparison to MT, the ST governance model was more inclusive and less heavy handed, which is why ST academies are all located at the lower end of the control spectrum. However, sponsor involvement in the day-to-day running of these schools varied, which is why Gable and Brookside are associated with lower levels of control than Streetwood.

Even though our work has focused on the state of academy chains in 2011/12, given the dynamic rather than static nature of chains (Hill et al., 2012) a study tracking their longitudinal evolution remains a priority for future research. Although Douglas' conceptualization could provide a useful framework for such examination, its limitations become apparent when we look outside individual chains and attempt to understand the implications of these entities for the wider education system and society.

The findings in this study illustrate that the relationships between multi-academy sponsors and the academies they run are diverse and are explained through a multiplicity of factors, including the development phases of individual academies as well as the governance and management strategies and practices adopted by sponsors. Therefore schools considering both conversion to academy status and joining an existing chain of academies face a complex task of identifying the most suitable arrangements for their needs. Detailed information regarding these arrangements is couched in the policy and practice of sponsors and, as such, is not necessarily transparent or available to the general public, making navigation in this market particularly problematic. This study provides early evidence to suggest the emergence of a new middle tier of academy chain sponsors is replicating the weaker features formerly exhibited by some local authorities. Ironically, they may be replicating and magnifying the very inefficiencies the academy programme was designed to eliminate through the recreation of a blurred field of local governance occupied by a wide range of actors with competing visions and values.

One key argument supporting the academies programme has been the 'freedom' and 'autonomy' to be gained from academy status (DfE, 2010; DfES, 2002; Gove, 2012). However, our findings indicate that 'autonomy' to experiment and make local decisions without sponsor permission varies considerably within-chains as well as between chains and as the findings indicate, chain governance can easily constrain as well as facilitate school-level autonomy. A system is being created through which sponsors, rather than individual academies, hold significant decision-making competence, which may or may not permit academy-level autonomy. Clarification of the political lexicon is urgently needed. Rather than referring to academies as autonomous schools, the policy discourse should highlight the autonomous nature of sponsors and their decision-making competence over the academies they run. It is likely that sponsors themselves suffer from political pressure and interference and this is a line worthy of inquiry in further studies.

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