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'Untangling the entangled knot': a critical and genealogical examination of Multi-Academy Trusts' (MATs) ideologies, power and governance in England

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ABSTRACT

The reduction in local control and oversight of schooling represented by the growth of Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) in England raises critical issues for public policy. These include the articulation and exercise of power in the governance of MATs, the future of democratic governance of local services and accountability. Applying Foucault's genealogical framework, the paper analyses the antecedents of current governance arrangements and highlights and reinvigorates suppressed, delegitimised and belittled knowledges. The authors argue that the threads of representation, community engagement and local control in school governance are important components of democratic renewal. The paper examines the play of historical and contemporary factors which have fostered a discourse that enables the subjugation of agency, self-governance and autonomy of MAT constituent schools and their communities. This discourse has wider significance for the centralisation of decision making and control away from communities, and the erosion of the polity.

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> First of all, a breach of self-evidence. It means making visible a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait, or an obviousness that imposes itself uniformly on all. To show that things 'weren't as necessary as all that'. (Foucault, 1980, p. 226)

The aims of this paper are to disentangle the interwoven threads in the knotted issue of school governance in the current multi-academy trust (MAT) arrangements in England, referred to in this paper as the 'governance knot'. MATs are a central part of the education policy infrastructure for schools and as such a current issue of significance which, as we examine, matters not only in the context of England but has wider resonance when seen in terms of global trends in education reform. A genealogical approach

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is deployed in this paper to enable a critical perspective on the present knotted issue of MAT school governance, which is examined by untangling the twisted threads in order to illuminate how the present dispensation emerged from a constellation of turns in the policy environment. These policy twists and turns create the knotted issue of MAT governance of schools in England today. The entangled threads that are separated out and illuminated in our analysis are: the influence of macro-level centralisation of power and control undermining local democracy and community engagement; the undermining of school governance, as the locus of power and control of academies shifts to self-appointed bodies – MATs; the significance of hierarchical and paternalistic school and community relations for the privileging of particular forms of knowledge in education and the decay of the public sphere at local level; and the growth and dominance of market and business logics in the organisation and governance of schooling.

A requirement of genealogical inquiry is an orientation on the present. In this study, the current dispensation of the academy programme and the formation of MATs is the object of inquiry in which we seek to unsettle and destabilise the basis of present policy understandings of how schools are governed. Put another way, we seek to problematise the current arrangements of MATs and their governance arising from the enactment of these policy understandings, which are portrayed as familiar, settled and accepted, by developing a critique of MAT relations to their constituent schools and communities. We argue that certain knowledges are privileged as superior whilst other forms are marginalised and suppressed. A Foucauldian lens is deployed for the task of analysing the operation of strategies of power and regimes of control, whilst the concept of rhizomatic connections (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013) illuminates the reconceptualisation of patterns of school governance relations for community participation and renewal.

This paper examines the articulation and exercise of power in the governance of MATs through a genealogical lens. We employ a genealogical approach (Foucault, 1986) because we seek to identify and illuminate the threads in the knot of governance policy and practice which offer possibilities for enhancing democratic engagement and strengthening community involvement and representation, for 'if we are to reconstruct our present so that it may yield better futures, we first need a grip on the materials out of which our present has been constructed in the past' (Koopman, 2013, p. 12). This paper, therefore, uses a genealogical approach to understand the network of forces, connections and events which contribute to the present dispensation and exercise of power by looking at the history of the present. History in this context embraces the multiple histories underlying the creation and development of MATs, the conflicts and tensions between these different

histories and an examination of which and whose histories attain dominance. This approach examines the present moment and the extent to which it is a logical and inevitable development or an unplanned and uncoordinated amalgam of events and ideologies. The paper thus has three elements: a critique of UK government education policy as it relates to school governance in the English context; an historical assessment of the development and implementation of English school governance policy, particularly as it relates to community engagement and democratic participation; and an analysis of the theoretical underpinning of such development using a genealogical approach.

The paper's contribution and significance for the field of enquiry lies primarily in the way the use of a genealogical approach surfaces and critiques the erosion of the polity and the disavowal of civic engagement and community participation engendered by models of school governance associated with MATs. The paper brings into sharp relief the play of historical and contemporary forces and events which foment a discourse that subjugates agency, self-governance and autonomy. Arguably, such a discourse enables MATs to claim superior knowledge as a basis for dominance and control of constituent schools and their communities.

Academisation of schools in England since 2010

In England, since 2010 the organisation and governance of schooling has been transformed by the growth of academies which, as Gunter and McGinity (2014, p. 300) explain, 'are based on removing the school from local democratic accountability by building on the self-managing school as a business in a competitive marketplace'. This transformation is marked by a growing number of academy schools grouped into MATs. MATs are the most recent manifestation of the academy programme in England, which has its origins in the 1997–2010 UK Labour government's programme to transform what were deemed to be persistently failing schools. This programme was embraced enthusiastically by the Conservative-led coalition government that came to power in the UK in 2010 as the basis for a pattern of school organisation for all schools in England based on institutional autonomy and the notion of a 'self-improving school-led system'. Although a policy programme of the UK government, under the long-standing constitutional arrangements brought about by the 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland and the more recent 21st Century UK wide devolution settlement, education is a devolved matter, and this policy framework only applies in England.

In the context of England, the academy programme, and its privileging of MATs as the government approved model of school organisation, is part of the reform and restructuring of schooling begun in the 1980s. This reform

forms part of the reshaping of economic, social and political life since the 1980s as the collectivist ethos established with the introduction of the post-world war two welfare state was supplanted by a neoliberal settlement of markets and individualisation. In this sense, it can be seen as the latest milestone on the road away from the post-1945 social-democratic consensus and its associated locally determined and administered system of schooling (Wood et al., 2021). This programme has been influenced and justified by international comparisons, most notably with the Charter Schools initiative in the USA and the development of Free Schools in Sweden. Evidence from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has been used as a form of validation of the English academy programme. This reform should be seen in an international context and part of what Sahlberg (2012) refers to as the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) driven by a free market ideology and the discipline of business and competition. The English context therefore provides an illustration of how these disciplines shape governance arrangements in schools that emphasise fiscal and functional decentralisation and transfer of power to unaccountable and self-appointed bodies rather than the 'enhancement of democratic participation, local control and community decision making' (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 117).

This latest ideological turn in the history of English schooling has reordered who holds power, makes decisions and how they are held to account. This reordering has been achieved through: the introduction of market mechanisms; the reduction of strategic coordination of the school system; and a diminution of community engagement and democratic accountability in the governance of schooling. These changes are significant for several reasons. Firstly, the growth in the academy sector of schooling has been substantial; the majority of children in England now receive their schooling at an academy. While 40% of all schools were academies in January 2022, over half of all pupils (53%) were attending an academy. This is due to higher proportions of secondary schools being academies than primary, with typically much higher numbers of pupils (Gov.UK, 2022). Yet, whilst over half of pupils attend academies, '53% of all mainstream schools remain local authority (LA) maintained. This is largely driven by primary schools. Only two-fifths of primary schools are academies compared to four-fifths of secondary schools' (Lucas et al., 2023, p. 3). We suggest that the size and growth of the sector indicate that questions of how it is governed and to whom it is accountable are important matters of public policy. Secondly, as questions about the nature, purposes and resourcing of schooling become increasingly prominent in public and political discourse, the question of how citizens can be involved and shape the response to these questions through the governance of an academised school system requires attention.

Thirdly, this is particularly so in the context of the renewed government commitment to full academisation of the English school system and the drive to group academies together into MATs. Concurrently there is a reduction of local authorities' role in education, through both a deliberate policy direction and large-scale reductions in their funding from central government grants. Taken together, these developments indicate a trend to greater centralisation over the governance of local services and accompanying reduction of opportunities for local democratic engagement through and with schooling.

The study

This paper draws on the findings of a doctoral study by the lead author (Pennington, 2022) which identified and critically examined the implications of academy status and the creation of MATs for school governance, relations and engagement with communities and the accountability of schools in England. Within this overall research question were five more detailed questions: what are the factors, forces and mechanisms driving changes in school governance, community engagement and accountability in MATs; what are the consequences of these governance arrangements for decision making and the influence of community voices; how are MATs accountable to their communities and what forces shape this accountability; what is the significance of the findings from the study in furthering understanding of how power, democracy and ideology influence MAT governance and engagement with communities; and what potential practices might be developed by MATs to enhance community engagement and democratic accountability. The research used a qualitative case study to examine how the governance of MATs, and more specifically, the senior personnel within them, understand and engage with the communities in which they are located and serve. The use of case study is influenced by its utility in drawing lessons from a particular setting; the question of what can be learned about and from the particular case which is particularly relevant in the exploration of how MATs operate in relation to their communities. The study embraced both governance at a local level (MAT Board and individual academy governing body) and issues of macro-level governance represented by the policy and accountability framework in which MATs operate.

The case study focused on three MATs and used interviews conducted during Summer and Autumn 2019 and Winter 2019–2020 to gather data on the views, ideas, and thoughts of senior MAT personnel, both executive roles (chief executive officers (CEO)/executive directors and headteachers of some constituent schools) and non-executive trustees (Chairs of MAT Boards). In addition, the clerk to the MAT Board in one of the trusts also participated as an interviewee, primarily to explore how business was

conducted by a MAT board at its formal meetings. The total number of interview respondents was 11. All participants were given anonymity by the use of synonyms as shown below in Table 1.

The qualitative narrative data for this study were analysed inductively using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the data analysis, the following steps were taken – immersion, reflecting, taking apart data, recombining data, relating and locating one's data, reflecting back and presenting the data (Wellington, 2015). In essence, this was a three-stage process: firstly reading and re-reading of written interview transcripts to achieve familiarisation and immersion in the data and produce notes and observations of these data as a prelude to establishing patterns and themes; secondly, a more analytical coding to generate the building blocks for construction of themes, that is the meanings that could be built (Braun and Clarke, 2013); and thirdly, examining the codes and coded data to construct provisional themes. This was not a linear movement through the stages; it involved a continuous circular movement between data, literature and written analysis and interpretation, what can be termed an abductive approach (Brinkman, 2017).

These data were interpreted to construct understandings and conceptualisations which yielded the following themes. Firstly, an 'inward-looking' exploration of the ways in which community and communities were understood and conceptualised, how these were (or were not) engaged with and the range of interests within communities which were given voice and influence. This exploration then focused on how power, control and autonomy operated within the MATs. Secondly, an 'outward facing' exploration of the ways in which the MATs in the case study were held accountable, how they exercised accountability and to whom they were accountable. Thirdly, an exploration of the ways in which MATs relate to their constituent schools and communities in which they are involved and the ways in which power was manifested and particular knowledges were privileged in these relations. In interpreting the data and constructing these themes the study sought to avoid the 'uncritical exploration of cultural meaning' (Crotty, 1998, p. 60) and employ a critical edge in the construction of knowledge about MATs which seeks to identify and factor in the influence of ideology and hegemonic interests.

Table 1. MAT cases and research participants.

Cases	MAT Case 1 – Heath	MAT Case 2 – Iris	MAT Case 3 – Orcid
Participants	Basil - CEO Theo - Chair Anthea – Primary School Headteacher Jocasta – Secondary School Headteacher	Sonia - CEO Jerry - Chair Jocinda - Primary School Headteacher	Judith - Secondary School Headteacher/CEO Gina – Executive Director Leona - Chair Denis – Clerk

In this paper, we have adopted a genealogy framework as proposed by Foucault (1986). It is the idea of using history as a means of critical engagement with the present – a concern expressed in his conceptions of 'genealogy' and 'history of the present'. Or, as Foucault explained: 'I set out from a problem expressed in the terms current today and I try to work out its genealogy. Genealogy means that I begin analysis from a question posed in the present' (Kritzman, 1988, p. 262). It is a relevant framework and valuable tool to examine contemporary practices in the field of education. As Garland (2014, p. 372) argues:

> Genealogical analysis traces how contemporary practices and institutions emerged out of specific struggles, conflicts, alliances, and exercises of power, many of which are nowadays forgotten. It thereby enables the genealogist to suggest - not by means of normative argument but instead by presenting a series of troublesome associations and lineages - that institutions and practices we value and take for granted today are actually more problematic or more 'dangerous' than they otherwise appear.

Genealogy is motivated not by a historical concern to understand the past but instead by a critical concern to understand the present (Foucault, 1986). A history of the present begins by identifying a present-day practice that is both taken for granted and yet, in certain respects, problematic or somehow unintelligible and then seeks to trace the power struggles that produced them (Garland, 2014). In this study, our concern is to surface and expose the submerged power relations and political struggles concealed within the emergence of MATs in England. We seek to unsettle and disturb our present-day conceptions and understandings of MATs ideologies and governance.

In order to mobilise the genealogical framework and 'put it to work', we need to establish concrete and specific critical observations about the present, and, more particularly, about the object of study as it is constructed and experienced by relevant stakeholders in the present. To achieve this, the themes constructed in Pennington's case study were subject to a secondary analysis, employing a genealogical approach to tease out, surface and illuminate the forces, assumptions and events that are submerged within common-sense understandings of policy underpinning school governance in an academised school system as expressed in these themes. Central to the examination of these issues is the question of democracy and democratic modes of governance; and the extent to which democracy is evident, absent, embraced, undermined, or denied. Current concerns about disenchantment with representational democracy and lack of involvement of citizens in the public realm (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Patel & Quilter-Pinner, 2022) highlight the importance of school governance as a participatory forum for democratic practice and engagement (Ranson, 2018).

As explained earlier, it is the twists and turns in the policy environment that are entangled in the knotted issue of MAT school governance that are critically examined in this paper. The paper now proceeds to set out some of the significant threads in the governance knot highlighted by our genealogical approach, illustrated where appropriate by extracts from the case study interview data. The first thread concerns the influence of macro-level centralisation of power and control which is entwined and interwoven with issues of the erosion of local democracy and community engagement.

Macro level governance: an unplanned and uncoordinated amalgam

At a macro level, the policy environment in which MATs operate is fragmented and poorly coordinated, characterised by 'chaotic centralisation' (Greany & Higham, 2018, p. 38). One manifestation of this unplanned and uncoordinated amalgam, promoted by the government as a solution for coordination and support of a fragmented school system, is the Self Improving School-Led System. Within this 'system', that Greany and Higham (2018) characterise as poorly defined and problematic, Pennington (2022) suggests MATs operate an ensemble of policy and performative technologies of target setting, data collection, monitoring and intervention with their constituent schools that is deployed as a form of superior knowledge.

One way in which such superior knowledge can be identified as a component of the Self Improving School-Led System is in the designation of individual school leaders as National Leader of Education (NLE). This study shows how the role of NLE and the superior knowledge it conferred was used by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of one of the case study MATs to bring schools into the MAT.

> The governors at Teasel School came to see me supported by the Local Authority to ask that if we would consider doing an NLE contract for Teasel School which is just a mile down the road. . . . we agreed but we said we would do this contract but we wanted them to consider, at some point in the year, becoming a member of a MAT. (Sonia, Iris Trust CEO)

Designation as an NLE also confers on the CEO the role of system leader, a central if largely undefined component of the government's construct of the Self-Improving School System (Greany & Higham, 2018, p. 22). What NLE designation and system leader status does give the CEO in the MAT sector and wider school environment is a credible claim to superior knowledge and a form of moral authority to take on a leadership role across a group of schools. As illustrated here by the Iris Trust CEO, this provides an argument and rationale for the pursuit of expansion and economic growth of a MAT.

Market logics and academisation of the English school system: the emergence and growth of multi-academy trusts in England

Our genealogical approach seeks to mobilise Foucault's ideas of descent and emergence. Descent is the exploration of the intersection of seemingly unrelated '"subtle, singular and individual marks"' that seem at once unified and natural. In so doing, this activity disturbs what seems foundational by identifying 'the accidents, the minute deviations, the errors, the false appraisals and the faulty calculations' (Foucault, 1986, p. 81). This activity 'disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself' (Foucault, 1986, p. 82).

Emergence focuses on the moment of arising when 'the current series of subjugations' come together in a ''hazardous play of dominations' (Foucault, 1986, p. 83) that in this study are considered to have given birth to the existence and ways of being exhibited by MATs. Emergences in this sense constitute the discontinuities of history which enable understanding of the current arrangements and their antecedents and the opportunities for alternative conceptions.

Genealogy is motivated by a critical concern to understand the present. It aims to 'trace the forces that gave birth to our present-day practices and to identify the historical conditions upon which they still depend. Its point is not to think historically about the past but rather to use historical materials to rethink the present' (Garland, 2014, p. 373). Using this genealogical framework to study MATs, we need to understand the historical conditions for MATs' conceptions, formation and their continuing operation today.

The road from social democracy and its attendant collectivist ethos, privileging of professional knowledge and democratic governance to a neoliberal settlement of markets, responsibilisation and corporatist modes of organisation, began in the UK with the election of a Conservative government headed by Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Whilst it might be possible to locate this event as the beginning of the neoliberal turn, it is important to note its long antecedents. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s a group of influential thinkers, commentators and journalists on the right of English politics produced a series of reports and papers highlighting and criticising what they saw as the failings of the social democratic consensus in education and schooling. Particular attention was focussed on such issues as the perceived deficiencies with comprehensive education in the secondary phase, the alleged breakdown of discipline in schools and suggested concerns about poor standards of attainment. These 'Black Papers', as they came to be known, had an influential role in the crystallisation of conservative concerns and objections to post-war progressivism

and perceived left-wing bias and influence in English schooling (Wood et al., 2021).

Looking further back it is possible to locate the controversy underlying the conservative critique of progressive schooling in the 1920s and 1930s (Tisdall, 2020). In relation to governance, the participation of volunteer representatives of communities of interest in school governance has antecedents stretching back several centuries (Baxter, 2016). Whilst a historical perspective is useful in establishing the line of descent of pedagogy and governance, it is also a reminder that summoning up the educational traditions of hierarchy, didacticism and authoritarian discipline which contribute to 'the phantasmagoria of Britain's golden age' is a tactic employed since the 19th Century to inhibit the development of an education system appropriate for fostering a more democratic society (Carr & Hartnett, 1996, p. 68).

With the implementation of the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) in England the logic and language of business, markets and consumerism began to take root in English schooling. Parents were now consumers making individual choices from a range of schools in a marketplace of educational enterprises which promoted themselves via the use of performance data about assessment and examination results. The CEO of a case study MAT makes clear the extent to which this logic now dominates thinking in the MAT.

> We've got to make sure that the community understands the Orchid Trust. Because if it understands what we're trying to do, and sees it as a high quality offer, then that starts to secure sustainability of the Trust, because you are a commodity that people want to be a part of, in other words, we will send our child to a school in that Trust. (Judith, CEO Orchid Trust)

Schools are thus recast as instrumental enterprises, closely aligned with the neoliberal demands of the economy and human capital development, and parents and the wider community become consumers of the MAT's commodity.

Academies can be seen as a descendant and evolution arising in particular from two aspects of the 1988 ERA. Firstly, the autonomy granted to all schools under the fiscal and functional decentralisation of the Local Management of Schools provisions. Secondly, the independent state funded schools established under the Grant Maintained Status provisions of the same Act. The opportunity for schools to convert to this Grant Maintained Status was, we suggest, a very real forerunner of academy status for schools, first introduced by the 1997–2010 Labour government and enthusiastically embraced after 2010 by Conservative led administrations. Grant Maintained Status, the first manifestation of state funded independent schools, initially came with strong financial incentives to schools to convert and later a form

of legal coercion by which all maintained school governing bodies were required to hold an annual secret ballot on the question of whether to become grant maintained. The policy and its enactment by central government became a site of struggle through the 1990s between Labour controlled local authorities and a Conservative government in London. The struggle was vigorous, with a national organisation and campaign to support local authorities in resisting Grant Maintained Status. Many local authorities devoted considerable organisational and financial resources to countering the move to Grant Maintained Status. The election of a Labour government in 1997 led to the ending of Grant Maintained Status and its replacement with a hybrid form of organisation termed Foundation School Status, by which former grant maintained schools were brought back into the local authority orbit but retained many of the features of autonomy and independence of their former status.

With a change of government in 2010 and a Conservative-led administration nationally, by 2016 with a new education act promoting academy status, austerity, the hollowing out of local government and diminution of its role in schooling had changed the landscape; there was no longer a local government capacity or will to resist academisation. Growth in the number of schools becoming academies took off. The grouping of academies into MATs is a logical corollary of the deliberate post-2010 reduction in scope and capacity of local authorities' role in schooling and the need to fill the gap in support, administration, and provision of services this has created. It also serves the neoliberal intention of bringing a range of private sector and non-state actors into the schooling system; both overtly through contracting out a wide range of core and ancillary services and through instilling corporate and managerialist disciplines into the organisation and conduct of MATs as one of the case study MAT CEOs indicates here:

> but you've got to have one eye on business all the time, and the business is that it's got to be economically sustainable, so you do have to watch numbers, you do have to watch that you may have a local competitor. (Judith, CEO Orchid Trust)

The CEO here, with her stress on watchfulness, the implied wariness of others and influence exerted on the thinking and activity by the demands of business and market logics is perhaps an indication of how being a MAT starts to construct a new, corporate identity of those involved in leading the organisation.

The emergence of the market logic illustrated here has come to be widely conceptualised as a neoliberal political settlement. This is characterised by the application of the market as the mechanism for the design and delivery of all public services and the reduction or removal of the state as an actor in the operationalisation of social policy; 'indirect governance via economic means' (Kotsko, 2018, p. 20). This 'post-welfare policy settlement' was

applied to education by the creation of quasi-markets through budget devolution, enhanced opportunities for expression of parental preference in the choice of school their children attend, and other aspects of Local Management of Schools introduced by the 1988 Education Reform Act (Thomson, 2020, p. 32). By these means so-called 'autonomy' for individual schools became an underlying principle of the school system.

The 1997–2010 Labour government's academy programme was enthusiastically embraced in 2010 by the Conservative Secretary of State for Education in the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government as a model for the future of the English school system. The 2010 Schools White paper, 'The Importance of Teaching', makes clear the intention to expand academy status and establishes a process by which outstanding schools in terms of judgements by the national inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), can become academies through a process of conversion. It also asserts the Government's view that the autonomy of individual schools is fundamental: 'In the best school systems autonomy is not rationed as it has been in England. Extending greater autonomy to all schools is an absolute priority for this Government' (DfE, 2010, p. 54).

The 2016 White Paper, 'Educational Excellence Everywhere', confirms the Government's belief in school autonomy via academy status and the creation of Multi Academy Trusts as self-evidently the future of the English school system:

> MATs are the only structures which formally bring together leadership, autonomy, funding and accountability across a group of academies in an enduring way and are the best long term formal arrangement for stronger schools to support the improvement of weaker schools. (DfE, 2016, p. 57)

Having thus positioned MATs as the necessary and self-evident continuation of a historical evolution of school organisation policy, the White Paper also sets out the intention to require all schools to convert by 2022, a proposal later modified following a strong adverse reaction from those involved with school organisation, leadership and governance and opposition from backbench MPs and local government during consultation (West & Wolfe, 2019, p. 73). This position remains the government's desired outcome but, for the present, to be achieved without legislative compulsion and restated in 2022 (DfE, 2022).

The logic of the market ideology has dictated how MATs operate in a quasi-market. Greany and Higham (2018, p. 85) conceptualise MATs in the quintessential business discourse of 'mergers and acquisitions' as one way in which MATs relate to their schools. This adds another dimension to the concept of marketing and competitive marketplace. Not only do MATs see themselves competing for pupils but also marketing themselves as

potential 'homes' for schools seeking to become part of a MAT through the process of academy conversion, and sponsors for schools in difficulties (those with a poor Ofsted inspection outcome) which are required to become academies as part of a MAT. This imperative begins to shift the way in which schools relate to each other, with relationships coloured by the need to think about expanding the MAT as one of the case study CEOs indicates.

> And building that relationship up, not just with schools that are in the MAT . . . but with schools that are not in the MAT. Given the fact that if you build a relationship up more positively, they may want to join the MAT. (Judith, CEO Orchid Trust)

In the context of the growth of the academy sector and the thrust of central government policy since 2015, there is considerable activity as MATs, non-academised schools and stand-alone academies eye each other across the education market dance floor with a view to establishing more formal relations.

Governance and the exercise of power: the role of governors, trustees and MAT boards in the control of constituent academies

In terms of the 'governance knot', the relocation of power and control of academies to self-appointed bodies, MATs, is another entangled thread entwined with changes to the landscape of school governance and market-led educational policy rationales, and which is examined in this section.

According to Koopman (2013, p. 4), genealogy is a methodology that can examine submerged problems without readily identifiable solutions and with numerous (and seemingly innumerable) interconnecting and entangled strands. Its purpose is not to explicitly delineate deficiencies nor arrive at normative conclusions in respect of such submerged problems and wicked issues but to highlight dangers and draw serious attention and thought to the 'practices of power and strategies of knowing' inherent in the problem. The task is not to unravel the knot and find a single 'golden thread' that will lead to a resolution, but to discern and delineate the many and various threads and the ways in which they are woven into the entangled whole of the problem. This is not about identifying a simple or single all-encompassing strategy but rather the multiplicitous network of strategies.

Governance in MATs increasingly eschews community representation and engagement and takes the form of a corporate model which privileges business skills and modes of operating whilst diminishing connection with community. Research by Baxter and Cornforth (2021, p. 583) concludes that community engagement and response to community needs is problematic in such models of governance. The way in

which academies come to this form of governance can be characterised as a one-way street that schools converting to academies are channelled into through the legal framework and its interpretation and operation by the Department for Education (DfE), its agents and associated advisors. As the process unfolds and the journey along the conversion street proceeds, options are foreclosed, and choices narrowed until only one form of governance is possible, as one of the case study CEOs indicates:

> Now when we were asked to support or invited to sponsor Arnica School, the Regional Schools Commissioner said there needs to be clear separation between the local governing boards and the Trust board. And therefore we, at the time, were realising that maybe this structure that we put in place of all inclusivity of everybody, one member from each school, was not going to work and it was certainly not going to work if we were going to get bigger because of how many people we were going to have. (Sonia, Iris Trust CEO)

The inclusive partnership initially constructed on the schools' own ideals of self-governance, mutual support and local community are quite quickly re-directed and repurposed into a neoliberal mould by the dominant business logics of the state and its agents.

The legal charitable company structure and associated memorandum of understanding and articles of association provide the formal framework for this corporate form of governance and become the only possible option a MAT and its constituent academies can adopt. Pennington (2022) suggests that the way in which power is manifested and exercised is closely entangled in the discourse of autonomy and alignment in the MAT sector. Autonomy of individual schools is privileged as a foundational value of MATs. However, the analysis of the case study data suggests that the conception of autonomy employed by MATs is highly conditional; it is constrained by central control within a MAT and must be earned on the basis of central MAT judgements about individual school performance, as one of the case study headteachers illustrates.

> I think because we are doing okay, you know, it's the kind of earned autonomy idea, we are doing well and moving forward and making progress as a school so actually it's okay, you know, potentially in the future if there was a school in significant difficulties where it was clear that the governing body were struggling, there may well be, there is the provision there to remove their sort of governors responsibilities. (Anthea, Headteacher, Fuschia School, Heath Trust)

In this sense, the denial of a subject's agency in determining their own autonomy poses the question of how far individual schools in a MAT are really autonomous.

The case study suggests that alignment is actually experienced as control by the MAT board. At the level of governance, governing bodies which had

legal powers and responsibilities for the conduct and outcomes of schools are replaced by local governing bodies (with a variety of names often containing the term 'advisory' to indicate the removal of powers) who lack any legal powers and whose responsibilities are entirely in the gift of the MAT board (set out in a scheme of delegation which can be changed, amended or dispensed with entirely at the discretion of the board).

On the surface governance would appear as a straightforward issue; it might be complicated but does not exhibit the characteristics of complexity associated with wicked or submerged issues. Further reflection on the antecedents of current governance arrangements in English schooling would suggest that submerged within the question of governance are some fundamental and complex issues about individual and community well-being. These include: the purposes of schooling and who determines them; the ownership of schools; engagement of communities and creation of a democratic polity; and questions of constructing an education that supports human flourishing. These significant wider submerged issues are entwined in the complexities of the 'governance knot'.

Discussion: alternative visions for future academy school governance

The current dispensation of MAT governance implies and relies on continuity as its justification. Viewed in this way, the current arrangements are merely the logical development of the school system evolving and improving in response to market principles of competition, accountability, institutional autonomy, efficiency and effectiveness. However, applying descent as a methodological lens offers a more fragmented and diffracted view with a number of threads which contradict notions of continuity and evolution of the system. As Pennington (2022, p. 145) noted:

> Pressures from high stakes upward accountability, the need to expand in pursuit of financial sustainability and the neoliberal business logic of increasing efficiency and effectiveness are perhaps driving MATs towards privileging corporate and business forms of organisation and leadership rather than democratisation and greater public participation in governance.

The nascent influence of these hegemonic narratives has led to the privileging of particular models of governance as having an unassailable logic and which it is therefore seen as fallacious to suggest otherwise. And yet alternative narratives which subvert the hegemony of neo-liberal modes of schooling, and which might form the basis for different visions of the relationship with communities and democratic engagement, are possible. Problematizing the market rationalities and performative narratives that have shaped the present and consistent with a genealogical approach, attention now shifts to the emergence and illumination of other strands in

the entangled knot of MAT governance and the opportunities these present for envisioning alternative conceptions which emancipate the present and inform future possible trajectories.

Neo-liberal discourse infiltrates and reshapes the intentions of individual actors within MATs, steering individual behaviours in ways which comply with the requirements of the marketised neo-liberal formation of schooling (Pennington, 2022). The current dispensation of English schooling narrows, forecloses and denies democratic futures and leads thinking along a trajectory where a particular corporatist exclusionary form of governance becomes the inevitable and seemingly logical outcome. Yet inspiration can be drawn from representational models of governance which constitute the strands that have been made illegitimate, disqualified, and belittled. For example, the formations and approaches such as those advocated by Taylor (1977), which serve as a reminder of the cost of dispensing with notions of community cooperation and engagement in schools as institutions rooted in their locale, in the service of vigour in communities and the mobilisation of strong local partnerships (Wood et al., 2021).

The concept of the rhizome from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (2013) can be drawn on to inform our thinking about patterns of governance relations. Tillmanns et al. (2014, p. 6) explain that 'From a philosophical perspective, Deleuze and Guattari perceive the rhizome as a "collective" of ever changing, interconnecting multiplicities, with no central control system, which acts as an inspiration for re-conceptualising the nature of reality'. The transversal connections of a rhizomatic structure offer a way of thinking differently about governance relations. The rhizome idea embodies the notion of ways to connect, and in Deleuze and Guattari's thought, it is contrasted to a tree, 'a marvel of stable, hierarchical organization' (Adkins, 2015, p. 23). As Tillmanns et al. (2014, p. 6) explain, Deleuze and Guattari's 'rhizomatic perception of reality' can provide:

> a viable alternative to more traditional, arborescent modes of conceiving and understanding our world. The arborescent or tree-like view of reality tends to rely on hierarchical understandings of our world. Such hierarchical understandings are characterised by a universal acceptance of the processes of segmenting our world into discrete entities, to which fixed meanings are attributed. The rhizome offers a means to move away from traditional and hierarchical frames of thinking as it promotes multi-perspectivity of 'being and becoming'.

Thus, the rhizome can offer a different way of thinking about how connections form without hierarchy, or linear predictability for 'It does not follow a linear pattern of growth and reproduction. Its connections are lateral not hierarchical' (Adkins, 2015, p. 23). Deleuze and Guattari (2013, p. 5) explain that 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is

very different from a tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order'. 'Connection' and 'heterogeneity' are amongst Deleuze and Guattari's characteristics of a rhizome. Take for example the way in which connection and heterogeneity are manifest in the concept of equal representative membership of school governing bodies, advocated in the 1977 Taylor Report in terms of numbers of local education authority, school staff, parents, pupils (where appropriate) and the local community. The Committee believed in bringing together these groups into dialogue to 'discuss debate and justify the proposals which any one of them may seek to implement' and to act together, share in making decisions about how the school is organised and run (14). Ranson et al. (2005, p. 357) explored how this representational approach to governance constituted a site in which democratic community could be initiated and nurtured, claiming the reforms to school governance flowing from the Taylor report to be 'the largest democratic experiment in voluntary public participation'. These groups formed an alliance, an idea characteristic of the rhizome: 'A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013, p. 26).

This interpretation of school governance as a site for democratic renewal and large-scale community participation highlights the connection and heterogeneity inherent in governance arrangements and a deep-rooted tradition of governance as a meeting ground between school and society. Tracing the root of governance, as opposed to management and leadership, is suggestive of strong engagement of community in the structures, purposes and control of schooling and a recognition that schooling is not in thrall to the market logics of the neoliberal state nor owned by professionals but that professional expertise needs to be accompanied by checks and balances to ensure it is deployed in the service of community needs and interests. Evolving from this, a dual relationship of accountability and support between school and community can be identified.

This is of course a contested space, characterised by conflicts between the different interests. Pennington's case study suggests that school and community relations are now hierarchical and arguably may tend towards controlling and oppressive. Ball (2020, p. 871) points out how this ground between school and society became dominated by the state and established order which sought to reshape and repurpose schooling as a process of discipline and control for the management of the population; 'a key space of regulation or biopower'.

Conclusion

The genealogy framework we have employed in this paper has helped 'making the familiar strange' for our understanding of MATs and their exercise of power. It has enabled a focus on illegitimate, disqualified, and belittled knowledges that are deserving of attention and according to Koopman (2019, p. 10) 'helps us see how every actual universal was in need of mobilisation at some point in its past'. In this paper, we have sought to use the genealogical approach of Foucault (1980, p. 226) to uncover and examine 'the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies and so on that at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal, and necessary'. In doing so, we have disentangled what we see as the significant threads in the governance knot, not with the intention of identifying a golden thread to resolve all difficulties but with highlighting those institutions and practices that are problematic and recognising 'not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous … the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger' (Foucault, 1983, p. 343). Framed philosophically, rhizomatic relations between multiple diverse constituencies acting collectively as a polity, provide a forum for civic engagement and community participation in school governance and local democracy without hierarchical, paternalistic, centralised regimes of control.

Such an approach exposes and illuminates a number of discontinuities and disjunctions in the smooth facade of MAT governance, which arguably bolsters itself with a superstructure of self-evidence and continuity. We suggest that in the case of MATs and the models of governance they privilege, these discontinuities, disjunctions and turning points can be identified in the following: the election of a Conservative government in the UK in 1979 and the neoliberal turn it precipitated; the advent of the Conservative government's 1988 Education Reform Act with its local management of school provisions for fiscal and operational delegation; the 1997 Labour government's adoption of the model of state-funded independent schools, which became known as academies, opening the way to remove school governance from community control and influence, and encouraging the hegemony of business and market logics; the post-2010 Conservative-led coalition government's enthusiastic embrace of this policy and use of it to remove all local control and community representation in governance, and centralise education and schooling policy outside the orbit of local democratic polity; and the accompanying reduction in the role and capacity of local councils to participate in and shape the direction and arrangements of local schooling on behalf of the communities they serve.

These disjunctions concealed behind the facade of continuity and self-evident necessity in MAT governance, which represent a danger to civic

engagement and local democracy, enable us to illuminate and give prominence to areas of suppressed, delegitimised and belittled knowledge. Our paper suggests that representational models of governance, democratic participation, local decision making, and community ownership of schools and educational assets are thus highlighted and given renewed legitimacy and importance as components of governance rooted in and supportive of democratic community.

The significance of the knowledges illuminated and given prominence by this approach perhaps lies in the current discussion of democratic decay, centralisation of decision making and control away from communities and neighbourhoods and growing disenchantment with the structures and functions of representational democracy. Such trends open up a political vacuum and expose the public sphere to the growth and spread of authoritarian and populist sentiment and political movements. The recent Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) report, 'Road to renewal: Elections, parties and the case for renewing democracy', analyses these phenomena and suggests that 'democratic reforms to enhance the influence of citizens and underpowered communities over public policy are a necessary component of any strategy to recapture lost electorates and reinforce the foundations of democracy' (Patel & Quilter-Pinner, 2022, p. 5). We argue that the important knowledge concealed by the facade and continuity of MAT governance and resurfaced and given prominence by our use of a genealogical approach, are important components of this democratic renewal.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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