



Structural Reform Research Programme Final Reports December 2012

AN EXPLORATION OF GOVERNANCE IN A CHAIN OF ACADEMIES

“A lot of documents have a Super Trust logo on but, you see, if I write something I always put the Brookside Academy logo on... nothing ever encourages me to put the Super Trust logo on.”

Brookside Academy, ICT teacher

Maija Salokangas, University of Manchester
Christopher Chapman, University of Glasgow

Email: maija.salokangas@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades England has made concerted efforts to reform its education system and since the passing of the 1988 Education Reform Act the pace of change has been relentless (Chapman and Gunter, 2009). 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 breakdown traditional hierarchies within the system and to encourage greater involvement of the private sector within education. This dismantling of the system is seen most acutely through the rise of the academy movement, the English equivalent to independent state funded schools such as America's Charter schools and Free schools in Sweden. Academies can exist as stand alone, individual schools or as part of a chain of schools under the control of a Strategic Management Executive (SME) (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 tackle persistent underperformance in the most challenging urban secondary school settings academies have become viewed by policy makers as a systemic solution to raising educational standards in primary and secondary schools across the whole system. By April 2012 50,3% of English secondary schools were reported to either already operate as academies, or to be converting an academy (Shepherd 2012). The number and size of chains of academies has also grown and Hill and colleagues (2012) stated in autumn 2012 over 48 chains of academies were running more than three academies each.

To date research has not managed to capture the details of these arrangements or the implications for emerging practice. Glatter (2011:167) summarises the situation as:

‘School chains and in particular their impact on governance of the wider system both locally and nationally should be on urgent priority for research’.

The aim of the study is to respond to Glatton's concerns by exploring governance arrangements in a chain of academy schools in England¹. The following overarching research questions guide the inquiry:

1. Where does the autonomy for decision making lay in an academy managed by a multi-academy SME?
2. To what extent does the SME hold decision-making competence over the academies it runs and in the ways in which the SME monitors and controls the operations of individual Academies?

The research focuses on the model of governance within the case study chain of academies, specifically, the ways in which staff within academies perceive the roles and responsibilities of chain and the sponsor and how they contribute to the work of schools within the chain. This leads us to 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 individual experience of surrounding social construction can be organised on a two dimensional matrix depending on their perceptions of their surrounding social order. In this matrix the horizontal line stands for group ties, as in how strongly the individuals involved perceive the sense of group, left side indicating very low sense of group growing gradually when traveling further right. The vertical dimension again indicates the degree of social control within a group as in 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). See the diagram below.

	Low Group	High Group
High Grid	'Fatalism': 'randomness/uncertainty'	'Hierarchy': 'bureaucracy'
Low Grid	'Individualism': 'market-based'	'Egalitarianism': 'mutuality'

This report is structured in three further sections. The second section presents an overview of the methods used to collect and analyse the data collected during the study. The third section presents the emerging findings from the study and by way of conclusion the final section discusses the implications for research, policy and practice.

2. A NOTE ON METHOD

This study adopted a case study approach involving the collection of qualitative data through semi-structured interviews and documentary evidence. The case study chain has 17 academies located across the country. For the purposes of this research the chain SME is anonymised under the pseudonym of Super Trust and the academies involved in the study have also been given pseudonyms. Purposive sampling was used to identify three academies. The first, Streetwood Academy is located in North West England and rated good in their most recent Ofsted inspection, the second, Gable Academy and the third Brookside Academy are both located in the Midlands and are judged as outstanding by Ofsted. Fieldwork was conducted in spring 2012 during which 22 members of staff (6-8 in each school) working in different roles: teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders, were interviewed for 45-60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis involved developing a list of codes and all the data was coded accordingly in order to maintain consistency in the process of 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 better understand the ways in which the chain is involved in the academy level decision-making a coherent sub-case of each academy was formulated. In this phase of the analysis the identified key themes were categorized in relation to Douglas’s cultural theory, more specifically the grid/group diagram as in whether they are associated with grid or group dimension. In addition the key themes were categorized in relation to the ways in which they were perceived amongst staff, as well as in relation to how significant and/or important the staff considered them to be in the day-to-day running of the school. The data was drawn into tables presenting each sub-case academy and then all academies together (See appendix 1). In the final phase of the analysis each sub-case was located in Douglas’s matrix in order to gain more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between the central governance and each sub-case academy.

During the process of analysis themes were categorized in relation to Douglas’s grid and group matrix in such a way that the themes describing the academy-to-academy relationships and as such, social integration within the chain was associated with the *group* dimension. The themes describing academy to SME relationships again were associated with Douglas’s *grid* dimension encompassing the instruction, steering and guidance directed from the Super Trust central governance. Throughout the process of analysis Douglas’s diagram provided a robust framework to develop our understanding of the power-relationships within the chain as well in the ways in which Super Trust as well as other academies in the chain are perceived in each school.

3. FINDINGS

Analysis identified ten key themes describing and defining the relationships between academies and Super Trust. The findings relating to social integration are presented first and then followed by those relating to social organisation and regulation:

A) *Social integration in academy-to-academy relationships: the group dimension*

The table below presents the themes identified from data associated with social integration within the chain, as well as related perception of the staff.

Themes related to social integration (group)	General perceptions + = positive/ - = negative/ n = neutral	Importance/significance: central/mixed/ peripheral
emerging subject area collaboration	+	Central
networking/partnerships	+	Central
head teacher revolt	+	Central

Generally, the potential the chain holds for collaboration and chain wide activities was considered a positive aspect of being attached to a chain and the possibility to build relationships with other

academies was repeatedly mentioned as a key driver for joining the chain. However, all staff interviewed shared a low sense of belonging to a group, which came apparent through a noticeable lack of loyalty the staff working in these academies had towards the SME and chain in general. Rather, staff in all academies tended to express their loyalty to their immediate colleagues in the academies they worked in, not to the Super Trust which was considered to be relatively distant from the day-to-day reality of the academies. A similar sense of distance was considered to exist between academies within in the chain. Interviewees were more engaged in local networks rather than the (rather loose) network provided by the chain. Geographical distances were mentioned as an obvious challenge for building and maintaining relationships between academies within the chain, but as all academies have access to modern technology, as well as some of them operating on a relatively close distance to each other, distance did not appear to be a credible explanation for lacking stronger academy-to-academy links:

“We have a huge issue in the northwest with gang culture, and therefore the collaborative work that we do have 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, principal

There was a general sense of disappointment among the academies involved regarding the lack of chain wide activities bringing the schools together and creating a platform for sharing practice. It became apparent the chain did not operate as a network of schools, rather a hub-spoke model, with the SME at the centre prevailed. Therefore, the academies within the chain, as yet, have not seen significant benefits from being part of a national chain, although interviewees were aware of other chains that had managed to co-ordinate networking and professional learning more effectively across their chain. There was one notable exception, the principals of the academies visited claimed they had developed a strong principal network, which they used to either undermine or support directives from the SME. This network was originally brought together by the SME, yet after few sessions the principals had taken the direction of the network very much in 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 something, they get it for us, they do it... We have somewhat cynical view about few things, like salaries shall we say, and other things. And when they’ve tried to take us to a certain direction, we’re simply just not doing it. “

Brookside, 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 be 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, Assistant Vice Principal

This 'principal's revolt' was seen as a promising beginning to building and strengthening relationships between academies, as in all academies the staff expressed a great need and will to replicate the model of the principals network to other members of staff in order to create platforms to share practice across the chain. The network has also given principals a voice in the chain level decision-making, all principals interviewed referred to the network as a forum for discussion in which joint strategic planning is made and in which principals get their voices heard. Such "united activism" amongst the principals to which the quotes above refer suggests that the principals hold a significant role in the chain level decision-making.

The role of the principals as mediators between their academies and Super Trust will be discussed in more detail within the following section that focuses in the steering, guidance and control imposed upon the academies by the central governance. This will also offer insights into the ways in which the Super Trust influences the academy level decision-making.

B) Social organisation and regulation by Super Trust: the grid dimension

The table below presents the themes identified from data regarding social organisation and regulation within the chain, as well as related perceptions the staff holds.

Themes related to social organisation and regulation (grid)	General Perceptions: + = positive/ - = negative/ n = neutral	Importance/significance: central/ peripheral/ mixed
New build	+	Central
Top slice	-	Central
Centralized resources	+/-	Central
Centralized policies	N	Mixed
Super Trust score card	+/n	Mixed
Super Trust league table	+/-	Peripheral
Branding	+/-	Mixed

All staff interviewed perceived a positive aspect of joining the chain was building of a new school building. Staff viewed the high level of political influence held by the SME as an important factor in delivering on the new build especially as the Building Schools for the Future (BCSF) initiative had been abandoned by the current Coalition government and many new builds were being cancelled or withdrawn. Another key feature associated with being attached to the chain, although perceived more

negatively was the financial arrangement between academies and the Super Trust. The “top slice” was considered a prominent feature of being attached to the chain, and its necessity was uniformly questioned in all interviews. There was a shared consensus amongst academies that Super Trust hasn’t provided value for money and therefore the current funding arrangements were unsatisfactory.

“There is a permanent contention 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, Principal

There was also a general agreement amongst the participants regarding the ways in which the top slice should be used to benefit the academies. Interviewees reported economies of scale and an effective centralized ‘back office’ resource as a key driver for joining a chain and more specifically Super Trust rather than opting to become a stand-alone academy. There were similar expectations in each academy about the potential benefits of scale and how it could be utilized to support the development of teaching and learning and co-ordinate professional development of staff. However there was a general dissatisfaction regarding inefficiencies in pooling and distributing resources:

“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... So that’s something that hasn’t really materialized“

Brookside Assistant Vice Principal

Similar inefficiencies were also reported in relation to the development of centralised policies, which were generally considered peripheral in academy level decision -making:

“I don’t see any Super Trust policy documents that would tell me what to do.”

Streetwood, head of Art

Although centralised chain wide policies did exist, the principals tended to be selective in which policies to introduce within their academies. All communication between the Super Trust central governance and the academies is filtered through the principals and interviewees outside of the senior leadership teams had little direct experience or insight into the work or contribution of Super Trust. In addition to the selective approach to chain wide policies, the principals tend to rely on their own judgment when it comes to taking chain wide practices on board. For example, chain wide performance management and accountability procedures such as the Super Trust score card (half-termly self-evaluation procedure using a traffic light system) and monitoring of performance against chain level league tables are SME requirements but have been received more and less enthusiastically in different academies and their use is variable.

“Waste of time [the score card]. Complete waste of time... it means nothing. It’s our headline figures and how we are supporting our students that matters... We don’t lose our sleep over it.”

Brookside, Vice Principal

“First one [the score card] I did on my own, now I’ve got a whole range of people involved... 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, Principal

The differences in perception relating to control and regulation imposed by the SME on academies are pronounced and may be explained, to some extent, by variation in academy performance, development phase and experience and status of principals within the chain. There is a strong sense of ‘earned autonomy’ within the chain, The SME is keen to *“let principals get on with leading and managing their schools but we are held to account through the Score Card and our education advisors”* (Principal, Streetwood). Where the SME trusts their principals and the key performance indicators are positive the principals are given the space to lead their schools as they see fit and match their change efforts to their specific context. When this is not the case the education advisor can trigger external interventions from a range of internal and external sources. Brookside and Gable have both been identified by Ofsted as ‘outstanding schools’ and the principals’ have an established track record of improving schools in very challenging circumstances. Streetwood, however, is in a different situation and is monitored more closely. The school is in its infancy, having opened in September 2011, reconstituted from a local authority school with a mixed history. The predecessor school had previously been celebrated as a success but the retirement of the longstanding headteacher created a leadership vacuum and a curriculum heavily dominated by vocational courses was exposed as masking serious underperformance in core subjects. The principal is also new to the chain and while early signs are encouraging there is a feeling they are ‘on probation’.

A further visible example of ‘buy in’ to the SME can be seen in the extent to which each of the academies brand themselves as part of Super Trust. Streetwood is heavily branded, from logos on paper, identity badges and the signage outside of the academy. Many of the staff also dress in the corporate colour of the chain. In contrast, there is little evidence of branding in Gable and Brookside and the principals were clearly hesitant to engage with chain wide branding exercises. Again, perhaps an indicator of individual school confidence and development phase?

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE RESEARCH AND POLICY

The findings presented in the previous section illuminate some interesting issues relating to governance in this chain of academies. This said the extent to which findings from a small-scale study of this nature can be generalised 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 report we firstly position each academy in terms of social integration and social control/regulation within the case study chain, secondly outline propositions in relation to the theoretical framework and thirdly discuss the implications of these findings to theory and policy.

The theoretical lens of Douglas’ theory provides a helpful heuristic to analyse the academy-to-academy as well as academy-to-SME relations as it allowed us to position the academies in the Grid/Group matrix. As with any typology there are clear limitations and aspects of each cultural type can be found in each academy. However, caveats aside, the findings suggest Brookside and Gable Academies exhibit the characteristics of low grid and group dimensions and may therefore be located to the bottom left corner of Douglas’s matrix. Generally, in these academies there was low sense of belonging to the group as well as an obvious lack of control mechanisms and structures put in place by the Super Trust. In contrast, Streetwood Academy senior leadership team had more instructional relationship with the SME which is why, Streetwood exhibited characteristics of high grid and also low group, and can be located in the top left quadrant of the matrix.

	Low Group	High Group
High Grid	<i>Streetwood Academy</i>	
Low Grid	<i>Brookside Academy</i> <i>Gable Academy</i>	

Interestingly, the current state of affairs was not regarded as satisfactory by the principals, who were all determined to move the organisation forward towards more centralised governance and stronger academy-to-academy relations; an arrangement in which all academies would be located in the bottom right quadrant of the matrix which promotes mutualistic organisations. The condition principals had for such governance model was the demand that principals would have an active participatory role in chain level decision-making, ensuring the relevance of chain wide policy implementation in academies.

Propositions

Drawing from the findings of our case study, and the work of Hood (1998) we argue:

1. When academy chains exhibit high group and low grid characteristics this promotes mutualistic organisations. This maximizes the potential for professional learning across the chain.
2. When academy chains exhibit low group and low grid characteristics this promotes market-based organisations. This will lead to a monopoly where very few, perhaps even one super chain will run all schools according to one preferred educational doctrine.
3. When academy chains exhibit high group and high grid characteristics this promotes hierarchical organisations. This will replicate the bureaucracies associated with traditional public service relationships.
4. When academy chains exhibit high group and low grid characteristics this promotes fatalistic cultures. Here contrived randomness and uncertainty dominate.

These propositions in mind we move on to reflect on some implications to research and policy.

Implications to research

Even though our work has focused on the current state of an academy chain, it has been proposed the use of the group/grid matrix could be operationalized for examining organisational change (Altman & Baruch 1998, Thompson et al. 1990). This would prove useful on a longitudinal study tracking the evolution of a chain, as they tend to be dynamic rather than static by nature (Hill et al. 2012).

Unfortunately it is not within the scope of this project to undertake a longitudinal study, which is why in the next phase of the project we intend to utilise the Grid/Group matrix in order to conduct a cross case comparison between the Super Trust and another SME run chain of academies in England. This will broaden our understanding on the nature of governance in chains of academies and its impacts on the professional practice of staff. However useful the framework is for within and between case study analyses, its limitations become apparent when we look outside individual chains and attempt to understand implications of these entities on wider education system and the society.

Implications to policy

The fundamental argument supporting academies programme has been the autonomous nature of these schools. However, as the findings of this case study indicate, this statement is problematic as variation in autonomy between academies attached to a chain occurs. In addition to variance in autonomy within chains, also significant differences in the governance models between chains have been reported (Hill et al. 2012). This refers to a system in which, instead of individual academies, rather SMEs hold significant decision-making competence, which may or may not lead to school level autonomy. Therefore, clarification to the political lexicon is urgently needed as rather than referring to academies as autonomous schools, the policy discourse should highlight the autonomous nature of SMEs and their decision-making competence over the academies they run. As the findings of this case study suggest, SME's are recreating the structures and processes found in many traditional local authorities. This may well be replicating and magnifying the very inefficiencies the academy programme was designed to eliminate by recreating a blurred field of "local" governance occupied by a wide range of actors with competing visions and values relating to the purpose and work of educational organisations and systems.

References

Altman, Y. & Baruch, Y. (1998) Cultural theory and organizations: Analytical method and cases, *Organization Studies*, Vol. 19, No 5 pp. 769-785

Chapman, C. and Gunter, H. (2009) *Radical Reforms: Reflections on an era of change*, London: Routledge

Chapman, C. & Salokangas, M. (2012) Independent state-funded schools: some reflections on recent developments, *School Leadership and Management*, Vol.32, No 5 pp. 473-486

Douglas, M. (1970) *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, London, Barrie & Rockliff

Douglas, M. (1973) *Natural Symbols* (2nd Ed, revised), London, Barrie & Rockliff

Douglas, M (1982) *In the active voice*, Routledge & Kegan Paul. London

Finkelstein, N. D. and Grubb, W.N. (2000) Making sense of education and training markets: Lessons from England. *American Education Research Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 3, pp. 601-631

- Glatter, R. (2011) Joining up the dots: Academies and system coherence pp. 159-170 in Gunter, H (ed) *The state and education policy: the academies programme*. Continuum. London.
- Hatcher, R (2009) Setting up Academies, campaigning against them: an analysis of a contested policy. *Management in Education*. Vol.23, pp. 108-112
- Hill, R., Dunford, J., Parish, N., Rea, S. & Sandlas, L. (2012) *Growth of academy chains: Implications for leaders and leadership*, National College for School Leadership
Available from: <http://www.thegovernor.org.uk/freedownloads/acadamies/the-growth-of-academy-chains.pdf> Accessed: 3rd July, 2012
- Hood, C (1998) *The Art of The State, Culture rhetoric and public management*, Clarendon Press: Oxford
- Miles, M & Huberman, M. B (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis: An expanded source book*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Shepherd, J. (2012) Academies to become a majority among state secondary schools, *Guardian*
Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/apr/05/academies-majority-state-secondary-schools>
Accessed: 11th July 2012
- Spickard, J.V. (1989) A guide to Mary Douglas's three versions of Grid/Group theory, *Sociological Analysis* pp. 151-170, 50:2
- Thompson, M., Ellis, R. & Wildavsky, A. (1990) *Cultural Theory*, Boulder, Westview Press

Appendix 1

Sub-case Brookside:

Themes	Related to Group Grid	General perceptions + = positive - = negative n = neutral	Importance/significance: central mixed peripheral
emerging subject area collaboration	Group	+	central
networking/partnerships	Group	+	central
head teacher revolt	Group	+	central
top slice	Grid	-	central
new build	Grid	+	central
branding	Grid	-	peripheral
centralized resources	Grid	+	central
centralized policies	Grid	n	peripheral
score card	Gid	n	peripheral
Super Trust league table	Grid	n/-	peripheral

Sub-case Gable

Themes	Related to Group Grid	General perceptions + = positive - = negative n = neutral	Importance/significance: central mixed peripheral
emerging subject area collaboration	Group	+	central
networking/partnerships	Group	+	central
head teacher revolt	Group	+	central

top slice	Grid	-	central
new build	Grid	+	central
branding	Grid	-	peripheral
centralized resources	Grid	+/-	central
centralized policies	Grid	+/n	peripheral
score card	Grid	n	peripheral
Super Trust league table	Grid	n	peripheral

Sub-case Streetwood:

Themes	Related to Group Grid	General perceptions + = positive - = negative n = neutral	Importance/significance: central mixed peripheral
emerging subject area collaboration	Group	+	central
networking/partnerships	Group	+	central
head teacher revolt	Group	+	central
top slice	Grid	-	central
new build	Grid	+	central
branding	Grid	+/-	mixed
centralized resources	Grid	+	central
centralized policies	Grid	n	peripheral
score card	Grid	+	central
Super Trust league table	Grid	+/-	peripheral

All cases

Themes	Related to Group Grid	General perceptions + = positive - = negative n = neutral	Importance/significance: central mixed peripheral
emerging subject area collaboration	Group	+	central
networking/partnerships	Group	+	central
head teacher revolt	Group	+	central
top slice	Grid	-	central
new build	Grid	+	central
branding	Grid	+/-	mixed
centralized resources	Grid	+/-	central
centralized policies	Grid	n	mixed
score card	Grid	+/n	mixed
Super Trust league table	Grid	+/-	peripheral

ⁱ The authors' wish to acknowledge the financial support provided by BELMAS. Without this support the project would not have taken place. The authors also wish to acknowledge and express their thanks for the support and critical friendship offered by colleagues working on other projects within this programme of research.