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From fragmentation to multiplexity
Decentralisation, localism and support for school collaboration in England and Wales

Abstract

Decentralisation and localism have become increasingly common drivers and outcomes of policy changes in many education systems in recent years, often supported by an emphasis on collaboration. This paper uses research into three collaborative initiatives in England and Wales to explore these changes. Informed by insights from network theory, it reveals a number of issues and tensions relating to decentralisation and localism and ends with a call to move away from a deficit perspective in order to use the multiplexity of current systems as a starting point for future developments in policy and research.

Keywords
Schools; Decentralisation; Collaboration; Localism

Von der Fragmentierung zur Vielfältigkeit
Dezentralisierung, Regionalisierung und Unterstützung für Schulkooperation in England und Wales

Zusammenfassung

In vielen Bildungssystemen haben in den vergangenen Jahren Dezentralisierung und Regionalisierung politische Veränderungen angetrieben oder sind aus diesen hervorgegangen – oftmals aufgrund einer verstärkten Betonung (der Wichtigkeit) von Kooperationen. In diesem Beitrag werden anhand von Forschung zu Kooperationsinitiativen in England und Wales die damit einhergehenden Veränderungen aufgespürt. Ausgehend von Erkenntnissen aus der

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Netzwerktheorie werden eine Reihe von Problemen und Spannungsfeldern, die mit Dezentralisierung und Regionalisierung zusammenhängen aufgezeigt. Der Beitrag schließt mit einem Vorschlag, eine eher defizitorientierte Sichtweise aufzugeben und sich stattdessen die 'Vielfältigkeit' (Multiplexity) der gegenwärtigen Systeme zum Ausgangspunkt für künftige Entwicklungen in Politik und Forschung zu Nutzen zu machen.

Schlagworte
Schulen; Dezentralisierung; Kooperation; Regionalisierung

1. Introduction

Anyone walking through the educational landscape of the United Kingdom (UK) 20 years ago would have been struck, as they moved between Wales, England, Northern Ireland and Scotland, more by the similarities than the differences in how the different countries operated. Although there were variations relating to history and culture, at that time their education systems all relied on Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to provide the majority of support services for schools in a locality. LEAs were responsible for appointing and employing staff, carrying out school inspections and supporting professional development. Over the intervening period, policies promoting decentralisation and localism have had significant impact on public services, including education, in the UK and internationally. Successive UK governments have defined decentralisation and localism in terms of transferring power and responsibility from local government to schools and other "frontline" organisations. However, critics have viewed this as "decentralised centralism" (Karlsen, 2000) and a "new localism" (Corry & Stoker, 2002; Bentley, Bailey, & Shutt, 2010) through which national government control has been increased at the expense of local government. This shift was accompanied by the emergence of a pervasive but often under-defined culture of partnership and collaboration (Glendinning, Powell, & Rummery, 2002; Duggan, 2014). Combined with the devolution of powers to national assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland and to the Scottish Parliament after 1997, the main form of regionalisation in the UK in recent years, this has resulted in increasingly divergent education systems in the UK, particularly in how support for the development of schools and teachers is organised. The closeness of the outcome of the independence referendum in Scotland in September 2014 suggests that this trend is unlikely to be reversed and may lead to greater regionalisation, particularly in England, but until now decentralisation and localism (however defined) have been more common policy drivers than regionalisation within the UK countries. Each of the countries in the UK has reacted in different ways to global trends as they have restructured their education systems with the aim of improving their schools' performance. For example, there are now significant differences in the level of acceptance, and use, of high stakes accountabil-

ity strategies, such as school performance tables and inspections, and in the extent to which partnership and collaboration between schools are integrated into systems and supported by traditional middle tier organisations, such as local authorities (LAs – as LEAs were redesignated after merging with children's services in 2004) or newer groupings such as academy chains.

This paper draws on evidence from three recent policy initiatives in England and Wales focusing on collaborative reform and views collaboration as both a product of policies supporting decentralisation and localism in education and a means of exploring them. As England in particular has often been a forerunner in adopting such policies, it is hoped that identifying some of the issues and tensions which underlie, and potentially undermine, them will also be relevant to other education systems.

2. Policy background

A key policy trend to which all the UK education systems have had to respond in varying forms and to differing degrees over the past 25 years is increasing autonomy for schools and school leaders. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) introduced local management of schools, allowing headteachers and their governing bodies to remove themselves from the financial control of LEAs, and introduced grant-maintained schools, decentralised through being funded directly by central government and thus bypassing local authorities, which were the precursors of the more recent academies movement in England. This reflected the increasing introduction of the public sector to competition and marketisation by the Conservative government during the 1980s and 1990s. The ERA also introduced a National Curriculum and led to the establishment of national inspection services, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in England and Estyn in Wales from 1992, which took over a key local authority role, and a national system of testing in primary and secondary schools.

2.1 1997–2010

The Labour government which was elected in 1997 maintained these accountability and performativity (Ball, 2001) measures, but the devolution of power in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, including responsibility for their education systems, led to increasing differences in approach. In England, emphasis initially shifted from school autonomy towards raising standards through a range of policy drivers, one of which was school to school collaboration. Schools have always worked together in varying collaborative arrangements to meet a range of purposes. This was formalised after 1997 in the form of several waves of initiatives and programmes, many of which focused on improving schools in challenging circumstances, often

in urban contexts (Chapman, 2008; Hadfield & Jopling, 2011), in which underachievement was a persistent issue. In England this included collaborative reforms such as Education Action Zones (Ofsted, 2003), Networked Learning Communities (Earl et al., 2006), Education Improvement Partnerships (DfES, 2005), and Federations (Lindsay et al., 2007). This was followed in 2005 by the creation of national and local leaders of education, resulting in a new "elite" of system leaders who were mandated to collaborate with, and sometimes take over from, headteachers in struggling schools. The creation in England of what were initially called "city academies" from 2000 was intended to replace schools which Ofsted regarded as failing or underachieving by allowing schools sponsored by external bodies to opt out of LA control. The criteria for this were loosened from 2005 and by 2010 there were 203 academies in England, no longer just in cities, although they were not replicated in the other UK countries. However, despite this epidemic of change, LAs remained responsible for the overwhelming majority of schools and for overseeing and brokering engagement in most of these collaborative initiatives.

2.2 2010–2014

The election of the Conservative-led Coalition government in 2010 and the introduction of extensive public sector budget cuts marked a considerable shift in emphasis, signaled most clearly by the Schools White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010). One of its central objectives was to "create a school system which is more effectively self-improving" (DfE, 2010, para 7.4; Hargreaves, 2010, 2012), an aspiration which has been supported by a number of policies. Since 2010 all schools in England have been encouraged to become academies. Department for Education (DfE) figures indicated that there were 4580 academies in England in March 2015, 1859 of which were secondaries representing around 56 per cent of all secondary schools. Academisation has been less popular among primaries, where the total was 2476 or around 15 per cent of all of England's primary schools. At the same time, the White Paper's call for people and organisations to open free schools, independent state schools with the same freedoms and autonomy as academies, was preceded by the observation that "it has been virtually impossible in this country to establish a new state-funded school without local authority support" (DfE, 2010, para 5.18), revealing the Government's determination to redefine the middle tier. By March 2015, there were 255 free schools in England, with a further 153 due to open from September 2015. Taken together, along with other White Paper initiatives such as Teaching Schools and School Direct, which have increasingly relocated teacher education and professional development from higher education institutions to schools, this represents a considerable and rapid shift in England towards an education system dominated by schools independent of local control.

The result has been an increasingly complex and fragmented educational landscape (Woods & Simkins, 2014; Simkins, Coldron, Jones, & Crawford, 2014) in

England and by extension in the UK as the countries' systems diverge. In England, this has led to "'disintermediation' – the withdrawal of power and influence from intermediate or "meso-level" educational authorities that operate between local schools and national entities" (Lubienski, 2014, p. 424), in that, as LAs' influence and authority has declined, other intermediary forms, such as academy chains and teaching school alliances, have only gradually emerged to take on some of their responsibilities. In the other UK countries, notably Wales, there have been attempts to adapt some of these innovations, while retaining some of the distinguishing features of their education systems and cultures. Recognition of the value of school to school collaboration, and of the importance of some form of intermediary support for this, is one of the common characteristics of all of these developments.

3. Comparing three initiatives in England and Wales

Our analysis of the research exploring the effects of recent policy shifts relating to decentralisation, localism and collaboration in schools is that, while it has produced important insights in mapping such a rapidly-developing landscape, it has often offered a rather under-theorised and partial picture, drawing largely on qualitative data collected from senior figures in schools, academies and middle tier organisations. With a few exceptions (Carmichael, McCormick, Fox, Procter, & Honour, 2006; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2010), there has also been relatively little consideration of the interaction between different kinds of networks on leaders' professional development, identity and approach, and discussions of school collaboration remain loosely-defined and relatively uninfluenced by research from other disciplines. There is not scope in this paper to rehearse this argument in detail. Instead, we have drawn on the research cited above and our experience of researching school collaboration to create a theoretical framework with which to explore the current educational landscape in England and Wales.

This framework takes as its starting point what we have previously termed a "structuralist-pluralist perspective" (Hadfield & Jopling, 2012), which emphasises the importance of collective agency and interactions within networks, alongside the network structures which have been the focus of much previous research. It draws on research, such as that cited above, which has recognised the dynamic "multiplexity" (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994) of interactions and transitions in collaboration and the importance of positionality in networks: how network leaders and members position themselves and are positioned by others. It also refers to key characteristics of networks of schools operating in disadvantaged areas, which research has shown to be effective in supporting collaboration. These include establishing shared values and common foci, enacted at multiple levels; linking professional learning with these change foci; creating high levels of trust, mutual knowledge and challenge; and maintaining structures for schools to access external support (Hadfield & Jopling, 2011). These theoretical perspectives have been used

to explore empirical evidence from two research projects in England, one completed and one ongoing, and a broader research-based engagement with policy and policy development in Wales as a means of investigating decentralisation and localism in education.

3.1 Leading Teachers (National initiative, England)

The first initiative was launched towards the end of the Labour administration and evaluated following the change of government in 2010. The Leading Teachers programme was funded by a government body, the National Strategies, between 2007 and 2010 in England and focused on improving literacy and numeracy in Years 5 and 6 – the final two years of primary education when children are aged 9-11. The programme funded selected local authorities in England to recruit and train leading teachers in Literacy and Mathematics to work collaboratively with Year 5 and Year 6 teachers in schools with below average progression rates in these subjects. It used a coaching model based on the lesson study cycle (Perry & Lewis, 2009; Dudley, 2012) and LAs were required to monitor the impact of the programme on pupils' attainment, teaching quality and professional learning.

The use of lesson study is not central to our concerns here, except to note its clear focus on learning and teaching. Rather we are interested in whether LAs were able to use the leading teacher programme to establish shared values and encourage collaboration at a systemic level across a locality. The LAs fulfilled a key brokerage and support role, bringing schools together and drawing on their local knowledge to target schools with both known expertise and support needs, as one lead consultant explained: "It's not a 'done to' model. It's about two class teachers having dedicated time to sit down and have professional dialogue about learning and observing those learners in their classrooms".

3.1.1 Methodology

Our approach to researching the programme was primarily qualitative, based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 21 headteachers and 22 leading and supported teachers in 22 schools and with key strategic staff in the three LAs in which the schools were located. Focusing on impact and effectiveness, it also included scrutiny of programme documentation and quantitative analysis of data from the national tests in English and Mathematics taken by all children at the end of primary school (Hadfield, Jopling, & Emira, 2011).

3.1.2 Outcomes and issues

The strategies the three LAs used to engage headteachers and their schools in the programme varied. LA1 explicitly targeted schools with which it did not usually work. LA2 identified schools needing support as part of their existing school improvement activities. LA3 integrated the programme into its existing partnership programme until positive word of mouth spread about its effectiveness. In each case, LA lead consultants and officers re-packaged the programme to make it appear as attractive and relevant as possible for local schools and staff. This re-packaging had common features. Firstly, all the LAs presented the leading teachers programme in a way that emphasised the shared values of collective responsibility and the need to work together to deliver benefits for all pupils in the locality. This was done in order to create the right moral and cultural framework for collaboration between schools and to challenge the perception that it was as a quick technical fix for relatively few underperforming schools. Secondly, it was regarded as a collaborative, rather than a deficit, model of school improvement. Finally, the programme was integrated into professional learning for headteachers and leading teachers to demonstrate its broader relevance to improving curriculum development, assessment and school improvement strategies.

Although the three LAs adapted the programme to their schools' needs and contexts, a number of common factors affecting the programme's success and related to the LA's coordinating role were identified. Enabling factors included: a fast, coordinated response by lead consultants; the LA's local knowledge which enabled them to identify sufficient outstanding and good teachers who were willing to become leading teachers; being able to adapt aspects of the programme, such as the target group of pupils, to meet local needs; and developing bespoke training and support materials which encouraged and allowed leading teachers and headteachers to take on responsibility for the programme. Barriers to success included the geographical spread of potential leading teachers, which could make it difficult to cover all areas in a large LA; headteachers who were unconvinced of the value of collaboration; problems matching leading and supported teachers; and instability in LA management structures.

What this summary of the research highlights is the centrality of the mediating role of LAs, which still almost exclusively constituted the middle tier as recently as 2010, in brokering and supporting the implementation of initiatives such as Leading Teachers and offering external support and challenge. LA officers and lead consultants were able to integrate the programme into their overall school improvement strategy and re-package it to make it more attractive to schools and headteachers. This meant that LAs varied in how they targeted schools and focused the programme. Some used dynamic processes based on data analysis, while others were more passive. The LAs researched were able to use the programme to build capacity for improvement and innovation among school staff in localities through highly focused collaboration, albeit to different degrees. It remains to be seen whether newer middle tier structures, such as academy chains or teaching school

alliances, are able to develop the local knowledge necessary to support such initiatives at a local system level.

3.2 Special educational needs consortia (Single LA initiative, England)

The second England-based initiative is the subject of ongoing research, begun in January 2014, in one city authority in the North West of England as it restructured the assistance it offers to schools through integrating access to support for vulnerable children and young people and those with special educational needs (SEN) through multi-agency collaboration. The city contains areas with some of the highest levels of social deprivation in the UK.

In 2013 a city-wide learning partnership was created with representation from primary, secondary and special schools "to lead the continued collaborative work between schools and other learning establishments [...] as part of the school improvement agenda" (LA strategic planning document). Hatcher (2014) has written about the rise of such LA-wide partnerships which often represent a blurring of the middle tier, in that they are overseen by LAs in partnership with new middle tier organisations such as charitable partnerships or collaboratives of schools and other agencies. Although the partnership was led by headteachers, they had close relationships with the LA and, in some cases, had formerly worked for it. Working with the LA, this more complex middle tier partnership commissioned research into its Families programme launched in 2014 to bring together a range of initiatives, from schools' approach to SEN to more complex issues relating to child protection. Here, we will focus on one strand of the programme: the primary SEN consortia.

Although since partially integrated into the Families programme, the primary SEN consortia were set up in 2010 following consultation between the LA and schools about SEN provision, the outcome of which was a request from schools for provision to be needs-led, rather than resource-led. 14 locality-based consortia were created, each made up of 8–13 primary schools, in order to fulfill some responsibilities previously undertaken by the LA. Thus, they could be regarded as new form of middle tier organisation. The consortia built on, but did not replicate, schools' experience of school-to-school collaboration, as all schools in the city had been members of cross-phase learning networks for over ten years. The consortia were made up of headteachers, their special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and representatives from outreach services offering support in areas such as challenging behaviour and autistic spectrum disorder, support services such as educational psychology, and health professionals from services such as mental health and speech and language therapy.

3.2.1 Methodology

We have used a mixed methods approach to research the programme and its impact, combining qualitative interviews with families and support workers, interviews with school staff, social network analysis and quantitative analysis of programme data. The primary SEN consortia strand of the research has involved semi-structured interviews with 16 headteachers and 21 SENCOs in seven of the 14 consortia (selected randomly) alongside individual and group interviews with LA Officers and 20 providers of support and outreach services.

3.2.2 Emerging outcomes and issues

The multi-agency nature of the consortia meant that it took time to build a consensus from which to operate. Headteachers and special educational needs coordinators in schools spoke of support for children with SEN becoming more responsive and better coordinated. Furthermore, discussing children individually and sharing support and outreach resources across schools in consortia inculcated a sense of shared responsibility in some localities, leading to more efficient support: "because everyone's working together, there's more understanding about more complex needs, so the children are being referred who have a greater need" (Educational psychologist). Social network analysis undertaken with a sample of consortia indicated that consortia functioned as an important source of advice and expertise beyond the school, although school colleagues remained the primary source of support. However, in some consortia these local partnerships were regarded as fragile and were undermined by external pressures, such as LA changes to provision and the national changes to SEN introduced in September 2014. Some consortia were keen to continue the advances they had made, but felt threatened by the potential outcomes of changes to local and national policy: "The consortia need to maintain their vision for the provision for the children and they need to take the time to assimilate the new system into that, rather than the new system skewing it in some way". This fear was expressed by a headteacher in one of the more established consortia, in an area of relative affluence, which had developed effective support structures fairly independent of the LA. Others found it more difficult to relinquish the LA support they were used to, especially in the face of growing demands for support. Unsurprisingly, the consortia where trust was more embedded tended to be more effective. Thus, some consortia had become fairly sophisticated in their use of data across schools to establish benchmarks for areas of behaviour and support which they used to allocate resources. Other consortia did not appear to have developed sufficient trust to make such advances. The reluctance of several headteachers to attend meetings in these consortia was regarded as evidence of their lack of commitment.

The multi-agency nature of the consortia meant that professional learning tended to be more informal and wide-ranging than is often the case in networks

or collaboratives focusing on learning and teaching. It was often led by SENCOs and helped them to come to terms with the fact that they felt that national and local changes to provision for vulnerable children and children with SEN meant that they were being asked to take on increasing responsibility in their roles. Headteachers, SENCOs and providers of support and outreach services experienced different benefits and impacts in most consortia, depending on their position and influence within the network. However, where collaboration and sharing resources had not been embedded, there appeared to be insufficient external support to broker and develop partnerships. Like many multi-agency collaborations, the consortia experienced difficulty in engaging all agencies which could contribute to their agendas (Cheminais, 2009), with health professionals singled out most commonly as missing. Although some consortia spoke of the benefits of having a collective voice and representing a locality, in others it appeared that delegation of responsibility had not enabled them to engage all the professionals they needed. In terms of the specialist work of the consortia in supporting children with SEN and more complex needs, the consortia with the most expanded membership were most effective: "You're always going to have that top level of SEN children that you need expert advice on and expert support" (Headteacher). This was also the case with children with complex needs.

Some LA Officers and some headteachers expressed frustration at the time it had taken to establish the consortia and at inconsistencies in approach across the city. It was also apparent that some consortia and schools were finding it hard to overcome their dependence on more traditional forms of support offered by LAs, reflecting Hargreaves' (2012, p. 25) assertion that: "Many headteachers are finding it difficult to escape the culture of compliance to which they have become addicted and instead espouse the freedoms of promised decentralisation".

3.3 Regional education consortia (National Initiative, Wales)

The final example contrasts recent developments in Wales with those in England. Although recent policy changes have been affected by the impact of global phenomena such as the recent economic downturn on public sector spending, they need to be understood in light of the history and development of local government in Wales. Since 1996 local government in Wales has been divided into 22 unitary local authorities, a mixture of counties, cities and county boroughs, a large number for a country with a population of only 4 million and a school system supporting under half a million pupils and employing around 27,000 teachers. This has led to concerns over the ability of some of the smaller authorities to provide the necessary quality of service to schools, an issue made more problematic in a system with a high proportion of small schools. In response to these concerns and as a part of a wider move to reorganise local government in Wales, a recent report focusing on public service governance (Williams, 2014) recommended reducing the number of

authorities by half. Anticipating this perhaps, in 2011 the authorities were placed into new middle tier groupings in the form of four regional education consortia.

3.3.1 Methodology

This discussion draws on analysis of research and policy documentation both as part of one of the authors' role overseeing a national CPD initiative in Wales and in preparation for case study research into one of the education consortia for which data collection began in January 2015. Thus, although it cannot yet draw on the empirical evidence base available from the other initiatives, it has been included to offer comparative insights into policy developments in one of the smaller UK countries.

3.3.2 Emerging outcomes and issues

The national model for school improvement in Wales has been based on regional school improvement consortia working on behalf of LAs to lead, orchestrate and coordinate improvement in schools' performance. They were intended to develop an infrastructure for school improvement marked by a combination of challenge and support. This initially had two main elements familiar from England: 'system leaders' who would analyse and challenge school performance; and brokerage of support and capacity-building through commissioning specific improvement initiatives and offering professional and leadership development programmes. The consortia were also to be involved in coordinating the delivery of national government initiatives and brokering school-to-school support. The relationship between consortia and LAs had to be negotiated sensitively as LAs retain statutory responsibility for schools and school improvement in Wales. The recent review of the Welsh education system (Robert Hill Consulting, 2013), the most significant piece of research focusing on recent changes, highlighted an initial lack of clarity about each other's role, duplication of services, and a failure by consortia to develop an appropriate balance between the development of system leaders, which was absorbing up to 90 per cent of consortia budgets, and their broader capacity-building activities, including supporting collaboration between and among schools.

As the consortia have developed, some of these early issues persist but a greater emphasis has begun to be placed on building capacity for improvement by forging collaborative links between schools. This approach has been reinforced by a national model for regional working (Welsh Government, 2014a) that sets out a vision of school improvement based upon a commitment that practitioners and schools will "share good practice and learn from one another through genuine partnerships and school-to-school support arrangements" (Welsh Government, 2014a, p. 1). The Central South Wales Challenge is a good example of how regional consortia are approaching the challenge of brokering and supporting collaboration. It has brought together over 300 schools in 30 School Improvement Groups (SIGs), each of which

has a convenor who coordinates a shared improvement plan for their network of schools. In addition, it intends to develop a number of "hub schools" to form a network of specialist centres for developing aspects of teaching and learning.

The development of school-to-school collaboration is not restricted to the regional consortia. LAs were given greater powers under the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 (Welsh Government, 2013) to require a weak school to collaborate or federate with another school. Other key initiatives include the Lead and Emerging Practitioner Pathfinder (LEPP), an initiative set up to stimulate and deepen school-to-school support with the aim of accelerating improvement. This involves pairs of schools collaborating to disseminate and implement best practice on a systematic basis for 18 months. The first tranche of 11 matched pairs of secondary and primary schools was launched in 2013 and the second in 2014. The Lead Schools in these partnerships are high-performing schools. Outcomes have been more mixed in terms of improvement in the Emerging Schools.

In its recent strategic vision for the education system as a whole, *Qualified for Life* (Welsh Government, 2014b), the government has committed to collaborative working at all levels of the system. In pursuit of what, like England, it describes as a "self-improving system", it has called for more intensive partnership working among schools and colleges and greater coordination of improvement efforts across the system. This need for greater depth and coordination in collaborative working is in part a response to the criticism contained in the Hill Review about the current level of such work and its potential to develop a truly self-improving system. This echoes earlier misgivings about the utopianism associated with some versions of school to school collaboration (e.g., Frankham, 2006) and suggests there is still considerable progress to be made:

> Too much of the partnership working is of the 'come and see what we are doing' variety, rather than being based around leaders and teachers sharing data and then working jointly to improve learning. Even where schools are working in a really deep way with each other they would not expect their partnership commitment to oblige them to challenge a school and intervene to support it if they saw it was getting into difficulties.
> (Robert Hill Consulting, 2013, p. 63)

4. Discussion

The fact that criticisms like Hill's are still being made suggests that collaboration, through its function as a catalyst for decentralisation and regionalisation (in Wales), may contribute to the complexity and "untidiness" (Ball, 2011) that have come to characterise descriptions of educational systems, as well as representing a means of working with such fragmentation. The question is how best to use aspects of this complexity to support, rather than undermine, positive change.

The changes that have been made since 2010 have occurred so quickly that relatively little empirical research into the new educational landscape has been undertaken. The research that has been completed has tended to focus on the issue of the increasingly complex middle tier and how schools can, and should, be supported to improve and raise standards. Taking a perspective based on collaboration and applying insights from our theoretical framework to the initiatives discussed and other relevant research identified a number of issues and tensions relating to the diminishing role of the middle tier as decentralisation has advanced. Here we focus on three areas that emerged most strongly from our analysis and which reflect findings from some of the other research that has been undertaken.

4.1 Autonomy/control

We have already suggested that increasing levels of school autonomy have been accompanied by greater concentration of power in central government, through Glatter's (2012, p. 568) "instruments of control"-accountability mechanisms such as inspections and league tables. As a result, as schools gain autonomy from local scrutiny and support, they find their ability to innovate remains restricted. A study of four English LAs suggested that this also applies at the middle tier level as LAs are: "held increasingly to account for the performance of maintained schools and retaining responsibility for the performance of academies even while their capacity to act upon this responsibility is diminished" (Boyask, 2013, p. 8). She found that their solution has been to adopt marketised forms of provision to fill the gap. As Crossley-Holland (2012) has emphasised, this has left many LAs struggling to find a role in the new landscape. Seen in the light of our research, it is clear that LAs no longer have the capacity to broker and support a leading teachers programme (example 1) and, where they are not finding marketised solutions, are attempting to transfer more responsibility to schools and others in recognition of the complexity which they face (examples 2 and 3). While research into academy chains, such as Hill, Dunford, Parish, Reas and Sandals's (2012) influential report, has suggested that they have the potential to effect systemic improvement, it has also recognised that significant challenges remain and that LAs have a key part to play. What is not yet clear, however, is how new middle tier organisations, such as academy chains, will find the space within high stakes accountability structures to promote and coordinate collaborative innovation in, between and among schools. This dynamic has also played out at a classroom level as a tension between prescription and professionalism, with teachers finding that academies' licence to withdraw from the National Curriculum does not exempt them from accountability measures such as attainment benchmarks and targets.

4.2 Collaboration/competition

In his first discussion of the self-improving system, Hargreaves (2010) advocated combining competition and cooperation, with "family clusters" of schools competing for mutual improvement. This was echoed by O'Shaugnessy (2012, p. 27), one of the strongest proponents of a marketised middle tier, who drew on Davies & Lim (2008) in asserting that "school systems are most effective when there is a balance of competitive pressure and collaborative relationships within the system". This rather crude opposition relies on an outdated and underconceptualised notion of collaboration for collaboration's sake, which a growing body of evidence examining the effectiveness of collaboration in education and other areas has called into question (Chapman, Mujis, Collins, & Sammons, 2009; de Lima, 2010). Subsequent research by Aston et al (2013) into the middle tier's role in school improvement in five case study areas in England identified some of the challenges LAs faced, which included being able to engage all schools in looking beyond their own performance and encouraging senior leaders to take on a system leadership role, leading in their locality beyond their institution. Our research suggests that some LAs that have been successful in helping to establish a culture of collaboration and mutual support in schools (example 2 and LA3 in example 1) may be still able to help schools to develop this sense of mutual responsibility in a more hybrid middle tier. Others will not. However, there is evidence from Wales that policy-makers are attempting to learn from experience elsewhere and instill a culture of mutual support *and* challenge that takes into account the multiplicity of networks in which individuals and schools are involved.

4.3 School improvement/vulnerable children and young people

We have already indicated that LAs are often still held accountable for all schools' performance in their area, including academies and free schools over which they have no control. Importantly, at the same time as it began to reduce LAs' power by signaling the expansion of the academisation, the 2010 White Paper also emphasised their continuing responsibility for specific groups of children and young people: "The local authority role as a convenor of local services also means that they are best placed to act as the champion for vulnerable pupils in their area" (DfE, 2010, p. 64). Much of the subsequent research into the new middle tier has focused on issues such as school performance and effective leadership, although Hatcher (2014) has drawn attention to the vague and depoliticized nature of the "champion" role and we echo him in emphasising the imprecision of the use of the term "vulnerable". The main exception, however, is Sandals and Bryant's (2014) "temperature check" of the evolving education system in England. They examined three functions in ten local educational systems: school improvement and intervention; school place-planning; and supporting vulnerable children. While they found that there had been a "decisive shift" towards local school improvements be-

ing led by school-led partnerships, approaches to supporting vulnerable children were found to be "evolving more gradually" than the other two areas and were affected by three broad factors: increasingly complex needs; increasing scrutiny; and diminishing local support (Sandals & Bryant, 2014, p. 55). This suggests that decentralisation is leading to LAs having to make a choice about whether to focus on school improvement or supporting vulnerable children, rather than integrating approaches to the two areas, and they have tended to build on existing collaborative arrangements, which are more likely to focus on school improvement. It remains to be seen whether academy chains or other emerging middle tier organisations find it easier to address both of these areas.

Our research also suggests that, while the decentralising impetus of the self-improving system may have created opportunities for positive change through undermining bureaucratic structures and controls (Chapman & Hadfield, 2010), it has also increased the challenges faced by LAs in moving to a more influencing, facilitative role, leaving them having to square the circle of maintaining levels of support for vulnerable children and young people with reduced funding. The LA in example 2 has attempted to do this through the creation of an ambitious, holistic programme and a more hybrid middle tier, which schools either lead or contribute to as significant partners, building on existing patterns and experiences of networking in the city. One LA officer spoke tellingly of the "need to make sense of safeguarding for school improvement", bringing together two of the three main education functions identified by Sandals and Bryant (2014) to reinforce each other. The evidence from the research suggests that this remains an ambition. However, both the English research initiatives we have focused on emphasise the importance of the intermediary role played by the LA, brokering relationships and bringing people together. Despite this, the combination of policy changes and extensive budget cuts (the LA in example 2 had a 52 per cent reduction in central government funding between 2011 and 2014) has made it increasingly difficult for LAs to offer the necessary levels of support.

Ongoing support for the primary consortia and the explicit attempt to integrate it and other initiatives into a coherent Families programme shows how one LA has attempted to make sense of this fragmentation and use it as a starting point for new ways of working and coordinating. The fact that some of the changes remain confusing and unclear to schools and other agencies is therefore unsurprising. The complexity of encouraging multi-agency collaboration in, across and beyond consortia underlines what we have long known but often emphasised insufficiently – groups and individuals involve themselves in a range of dynamic and rapidly changing collaborative arrangements to meet different needs and purposes. Multi-agency collaboration problematises this further as the shared values and mutual knowledge on which they depend to function effectively are even more various and dependent on the professional, as well as geographical, contexts in which they work. So trust, often regarded as the foundation of effective collaboration (Ainscow, Mujis, & West, 2006), takes on different forms and purposes, depending on what the collaboration is trying to achieve. This is made more difficult by the

nascent and blurred middle tier partnerships that have emerged to support collaboration and lead change. The withdrawal of power and authority from LAs has reduced their power and ability to resist pressures to conform (Hatcher, 2014), which school-led partnerships or academy chains cannot replace. Wales is a useful counter-example in that it has taken a more traditional, national approach to regionalisation without undoing local democratic structures and has emphasised the importance of middle tier coordination to help schools accommodate change, even in areas such as school improvement.

5. Conclusion

Where then does this leave us and other countries looking at developments in the UK? Taking a wider European perspective, Altrichter, Heinrich, & Soukup-Altrichter (2014) emphasise that traditional governance through a combination of hierarchical state regulation and teachers' professional autonomy has been weakened, but crucially not replaced, in Austria and elsewhere by strictures associated with high stakes accountability and new public management. This has resulted in what they term a "hybrid coordination constellation" (Altrichter et al., 2014, p. 694) becoming even more hybridized. Applying this to the UK leaves England in an extreme position of marketised localism controlled nationally with a considerably weakened middle tier, while Wales (and other UK countries) has adopted a more hybrid approach, attempting to combine regionalisation with more traditional governance approach. The appointment in England from September 2014 of eight regional schools commissioners, expressly to monitor academies in their area, has added an additional layer of complexity. It remains to be seen where the approach taken in England, or the more coordinated approach found in Wales and other countries, is more enduring. However, the issues and tensions highlighted in our discussion in this paper suggest that significant challenges remain.

As collaboration is a common feature of all these approaches, locked into an uneasy relationship with competitive pressures, perhaps research (and research-informed policy) needs to take this is as a starting point and look at what we know about sustainable collaboration in particular contexts and combining it with evidence about effective systemic change in education – for example, the need to combine depth and spread and involve multiple actors and agents operating at different levels (Coburn, 2003; Cordingley & Bell, 2007). A more pluralist recognition of the "multiplexity" (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994) of the networks that individuals, groups and organisations occupy and their dynamism and interdependence (Hadfield & Jopling, 2012) may offer a more nuanced and effective way to explore issues like decentralisation and localism. This would allow us to begin to map what combinations of factors lead to successful reform in specific areas in local, regional and national contexts, moving us from a deficit position in which fragmentation is regarded as a barrier to change to a more ambitious approach which takes multi-

plexity as the starting point for developing new and more fluid approaches (Smith, Aston, Sims, & Easton, 2012) to middle tier coordination and support without losing local accountability.

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