

School leadership in English sponsored academy trusts: a phenomenological study of how primary school headteachers experience their relationships with their trusts

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### Abstract

The research within this thesis examines the phenomenon of school sponsorship in English primary schools, considering its impact on headteacher leadership. Academy sponsorship commenced at the start of this century when the Labour party permitted businesses to run a few secondary schools in challenging areas but was reimagined by the coalition government in 2010 into a much larger initiative; therefore the phenomenon is relatively recent. Whilst a contemporary concept, sponsored academies are often seen as a continuation of decentralisation of education through site-based management, while concurrently increasing the accountability on schools; a phenomenon mirrored globally. My research does not examine if sponsorship 'works', as it does not consider if these schools lead to 'improvements', rather the intention was to elicit the perspectives of primary school headteachers to examine how they experience and understand the phenomenon of school leadership in the context of sponsored primary academies. Relationships with sponsors were explored by utilising a phenomenological methodology. Eleven headteachers of primary sponsored academies were interviewed using a semi-structured interview method with the findings further developed through discussions with a group of school leaders in a focus group. The findings resulted in the development of new conceptual frameworks focussing on autonomy and accountability, leading to reflections on the *trust* that sponsors have in their headteachers. The thesis concludes with a reflection on the insights the research could afford the profession and policy makers and the potential limitations of the research.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **1.1 Introduction**

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Labour party introduced academies into the English secondary school system. These were a very small number of existing schools that central government took out of local authority control and funded non-government organisations to run directly within 'trusts'; prior to this, local authorities had directed education in their areas as the traditional 'middle tier' of educational control in the country since 1902 (the governance tier between national government and schools). This programme of academisation was later extended by the coalition government, elected in 2010, and subsequent Conservative led administrations to include primary schools; primary academies have therefore only been in operation since 2010 / 2011. In addition, from 2010 non-government organisations could establish new schools without local authority control, referred to as Free Schools. Some of these academies and Free Schools are operated by trusts that have been awarded 'sponsor' status by the Department for Education which allows them to run schools designated as 'failing'. Academies are confined to the English education system in the United Kingdom as education is a devolved aspect within each of the countries of the UK (Baxter and Cornforth, 2019). Whilst academies are only an element of the UK education system in England, there are comparable examples of this phenomenon in other education jurisdictions globally, referred to collectively as publicly funded autonomous schools by West, Ingram and Hind (2006), including in Sweden, the USA and New Zealand. The introduction of academies in England, especially those that emerged post 2010 has been highly controversial, with claims that the Conservative

government are privatising education (as schools are run by non-government organisations that follow company legislation, although not currently 'for profit' - unlike their Swedish equivalents, Free Schools that can be run for profit (Lundahl *et al*; 2013)). There has even been a group established to oppose the academy movement – the 'Anti Academy Alliance', supported by a wide range of unions. In 2016, the Conservative government had planned the next phase in the implementation of academisation in England with a commitment that all state schools would become academies as part of multi-academy trusts (Department for Education, 2016). At the time, this policy received widespread condemnation from many bodies, including from within the Conservative Party forcing the government to drop the plan to achieve this through legislation. Despite this, the government still appears committed to universal academisation (Baxter and Floyd, 2019) and commentators have referred to the decision to cease the plans as a 'detour rather than a U-turn' (Power, 2016).

What is not in question is that the structural changes introduced by the Conservative-led administrations from 2010 have changed the educational landscape in England. Yet, only ten years into this Conservative party 'revolution' the empirical evidence relating to academisation and the impact on headteachers of sponsored primary schools specifically is limited as this is such a new phenomenon, and a phenomenon that is still evolving as the government continues to develop the academy programme further (Department for Education, 2019a). The research in this thesis was therefore designed to examine the increasingly complex relationships that headteachers employed within such sponsored academy trusts have with their sponsors and to develop new conceptual frameworks to accurately capture the current situation.

This chapter outlines the rationale for engaging in this research and identifies my recent career history to help understand my positionality, which will be explored in greater depth in the methodology chapter. The rationale leads to the establishment of my research aims and key research questions. The chapter also sets out the complex and fast-moving policy context that sponsored primary academy headteachers operate within, including setting out how English academies relate to international educational developments; this is a descriptive narrative as a precursor to the analytical discourse in the literature review. The chapter concludes by outlining the structure of the thesis.

## **1.2 Rationale for the research**

In 2000 I was appointed to my first headship and was subsequently headteacher of three other primary schools, with my final headship commencing in September 2014 when I was appointed headteacher of a sponsored academy; the school was a stand-alone academy, although a member of a sponsored umbrella trust led by a Church of England diocese. My move out of the local authority (LA) sector and into the academy sector was a conscious decision based on my desire to lead a school outside of LA control to further my experience. In 2017 I left headship to become the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a Church of England sponsored multi-academy trust in the West Midlands, growing from an initial six schools to the current seventeen, all within the primary sector.

The early evidence on academisation being presented by both the government and researchers focused primarily on pupil attainment, school performance (as judged by



inspection outcomes) and the secondary school sector; I felt the voice of professionals was missing from the discourse, and in particular those in the primary sector, although since I started my research more has been published, albeit this has often been generic research about academy headship rather than specifically related to primary academy headship. I was concerned that research that concentrated only on secondary headteachers or generically covered both secondary and primary leaders might be missing what may appear to be nuanced differences, but these could be significant to primary practitioners. As will be discussed in this thesis, the rate of academy conversion in the primary school sector is significantly less than in the secondary sector, suggesting there are important differences in the academy programme. In addition, to-date conceptualisation of sponsored academisation has been limited and therefore we are reliant upon the studies of Hill *et al.* (2012), Gibson (2014), Greany (2018) and the unpublished work of Carter (2017); given the amount of change within the system the frameworks of Hill *et al.* (2012) and Gibson (2014) are sufficiently historical in this fast-changing space to now have questionable relevance as they conceptualise a version of the phenomenon that does not closely resemble the current picture. Consequently, a key aim of my research is to provide the profession with contemporary frameworks that may be helpful in conceptualising the current situation in the primary academy sector.

Since moving from the local authority sector into the world of sponsored academies I have also been acutely aware of the often-negative press towards this form of academisation. Yet many of the stories I was reading did not correspond with my own experience of being a headteacher in a sponsored academy; I wanted to explore the phenomenon further and

afford the profession greater insight into the relationships primary headteachers employed by sponsors have with their trusts. In addition to this rationale for completing my research I also had a personal interest as I wanted to use the research to aid my own professional role. A key aim of professional doctorates, in contrast to more traditional doctoral degrees, is that the research should have a practical dimension to the professional's work. The research has already had a demonstrable impact on my own work as it has given me a clear insight into the perspective of headteachers in sponsored academies which has aided me in developing the sponsored multi-academy trust (MAT) I lead; this will be discussed further in chapter 6.

### **1.3 The aim and design summary of the research**

The single aim of my empirical study in this thesis is **to understand the relationships that sponsored primary headteachers have with their academy trusts in England**. This led to the following research questions:

- Is leadership 'shared' between the sponsor and the headteacher?
- Can sponsored headteachers establish their own vision and values in their academies?
- How do primary headteachers in sponsored academies perceive their relationship with their sponsor?

The objectives of my research are:

- To support the profession and academics in conceptualising the current manifestation of sponsored academisation in the primary sector through the development of new frameworks;
- To provide policy makers and fellow professionals with increased knowledge regarding the relationships primary headteachers have with their sponsored academy trusts in order that these relationships can be positive for the benefit of the trusts, staff and pupils;
- To support my own professional development, in particular in developing my role as CEO of a multi-academy trust.

The research questions led to the use of a qualitative research paradigm and the methodology chapter will outline the justification for employing a phenomenological approach, which aims to *describe* and *understand* how phenomena are experienced at first hand by those that are involved with it. The fieldwork entailed interviewing a group of primary academy headteachers through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. A variety of sampling methods were employed to select headteachers who were representative of the different types of sponsors e.g. faith based, stand-alone, national chains and successful school-led trusts. The evidence from these interviews was then coded and initial conclusions reached before discussing the findings with a group of sponsored primary headteachers as part of a focus group. Detailed explanation of my research design will be set out in the methodology chapter.

The research centres on the relationships these headteachers had with their sponsor academy trusts. Leadership in a school is wider than just the headteacher as it also involves the governing body and wider members of the leadership team such as deputy and assistant headteachers as well as subject leaders; the headteacher though is the main strategic and operational lead within the school and it is therefore the leadership of this individual that the research focuses upon, rather than the wider leadership team and their relationship with their sponsored trust. In reality trusts are inanimate, as a socially constructed phenomenon – it is a collection of trustees, governors, staff and pupils. The different types of *relationship* that a headteacher can have with their trust are therefore complex. The research is not focussed on governance although by virtue governance has an impact on headteachers as the strategic vision for the trust comes from the trustees and therefore some aspects of governance will be examined to determine how they are experienced by the headteachers.

#### **1.4 Identifying the policy context**

In order to understand the phenomenon of sponsored academisation it is important to discuss the policy context that the concept fits within. This section therefore tracks the development of academies in England and examines equivalent initiatives around the world. I then set out the data concerning the growth of academies and the different forms of sponsorship seen in England. The legal footing of academies is discussed before moving on to consider the meaning of sponsorship. The section concludes with analysis of how the academy movement has evolved so far. The purpose here is to provide the essential

contextual data to help understand what academies are, how they have developed over time and how the specific notion of 'sponsored academies' has emerged within the wider academies policy context.

#### **1.4.1 Decentralisation of education and the international emergence of 'publicly funded autonomous schools'**

Sponsored academies are promoted by the current government as a further extension of the decentralisation of education through what was originally referred to as *site-based management*, now more often referred to as headteacher *autonomy* (both of which are defined and discussed in detail in chapter 2). This process of formally decentralising education began in England in the mid-1980s as the Conservative government began to delegate funding directly to schools. Glatter (2012) though refers to there being a 'persistent preoccupation' (p559) towards school autonomy, leading to a 'rise and rise' (p559) of the phenomenon. In fact, the increase in headteacher autonomy rather than being a 'rise' could be considered a *return* to the period before 1902, given that at its inception education was totally autonomous in England, with little if any government control as the state was reluctant to intervene in education (Ball, 2012a), a situation that would be completely changed over time to a point where the government was the key deliverer of education in the country – albeit delegated to the middle tier of local authorities.

In England, local authorities have traditionally acted as this middle-tier since 1902 in delivering education in their local areas. In other countries, myriad systems exist, although

the concept of a 'middle tier' located in local / regional government is a common one. Examples of these include in Sweden, where the middle-tier is formed of local education authorities in municipalities (Nordholm, 2016); in the USA, education is delivered by the individual states which is further delegated to individual school-boards in each district – these school-boards are mainly comprised of non-education representatives and therefore a key role for each board is to appoint a superintendent for their area akin to the role of a CEO (Bjork, Browne-Ferrigno and Potterton, 2020). In some instances, the superintendent is only responsible for around 3,000 pupils and therefore their role in these areas can be likened to that of a CEO of a medium sized MAT in England.

In England, the decentralisation of education began in the 1980s. Prior to the mid-1980s all school financial matters in England were dealt with by local authorities, but the 1986 Education Act saw the start of the delegation of funding directly to school leaders, although initially this was only a small amount of money for the purchase of such items as books and stationery. It was not until the 1988 Education Reform Act that schools were given significant funds to run their establishments through Local Management of Schools (LMS) (Levacic, 2008), building on the positive experience of six trial local authorities (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988); although this initiative might be seen as the start of site-based management in England it should be acknowledged that prior to 1988 headteachers in England had more autonomy than the majority of their counterparts in other jurisdictions (Thomson, 2010; Bottery, 2001). The 1988 act also gave school leaders the option to increase the degree of site-based management in their school through the introduction of Grant Maintained schools. These schools were directly run by governors and the

headteacher but were out of LA control and can be seen as the forerunners of academies; to become a Grant Maintained school parents had to vote for the school to convert. There was a move to create sponsored Grant Maintained schools but there were only two such schools established (Walford, 1997) as the programme was halted when the Conservative administration lost power in 1997.

From the 1990s onwards, across a number of international jurisdictions, new forms of schools, similar to Grant Maintained schools in England, began to be established to allow parental choice and attempt to engineer competition amongst schools; these schools were typically located outside of the direct control of middle tiers and central governments but were still funded by the state and are referred to by West, Ingram and Hind (2006) as 'publicly funded autonomous schools'. These new forms of schools were promoted on the philosophy that taking schools away from the traditional middle tiers of education control would not only allow for competition in the education sector but also increase autonomy for school leaders, and consequently lead to an improvement in the education provided to pupils.

Although New Labour abandoned the Grant Maintained schools programme, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century they extended the scope of site-based management for some headteachers and governing bodies through the introduction of the academies programme, which involved businesses sponsoring schools in areas of high deprivation in order to tackle consistent underperformance in some secondary schools (Briggs and Simons, 2014), referred to as 'Mark I' sponsored academies by the Academies Commission

(2013). In this model, sponsors brought their business approaches and finances to school improvement and in return these schools were delegated increased autonomy (and in essence were very similar to Grant Maintained schools). These first Mark I academies appeared from 2002 (Ehren and Perryman, 2018). The Mark I model was later developed by Labour to include sponsorship by universities, charities, and even other schools (so-called Mark II academies). Under the leadership of Michael Gove (Secretary of State for Education, 2010 to 2014), the coalition government extended the academies programme through the Academies Act 2010 which gave certain, high performing schools the option to run their own organisations without local authority control, referred to as 'Mark III' academies (Academies Commission, 2013) or 'Independent State-funded Schools' by Chapman and Salokangas (2012). The Conservative policy was later extended to allow all schools to come out of LA control, although for some this was only if an academy trust sponsored them. Twenty years since the foundation of Labour's academies programme, and ten years since the Conservative party reimagined the phenomenon, the semantics around academisation have changed; no longer is the term linked to a failing school initiative but instead is associated with 'freedom' from certain government regulations (Courtney, 2015; Ehren and Perryman, 2018) as the government offered all academy trusts increased autonomy compared to LA maintained schools. As a result, academies can set their own terms, conditions and pay structures for staff, they do not have to follow the National Curriculum and newer academies are not obliged to only employ qualified teachers (West, 2015). They are also able to set their own school hours, and some have been allowed to deviate from the national Schools' Food Plan. Academies have delegated to them the maximum amount of autonomy available in the English state funded system;



in fact, there is no difference in the level of autonomy delegated by the government to all forms of academies (forced, converter, sponsored or free school), although in practice in sponsored academies the sponsor may not delegate all of the ‘freedoms’ to the school leadership team as it is the sponsor and not the school that has been granted these freedoms.

The increase in ‘freedom’ for headteachers led to some significant cases of maladministration and fraud in a few academy trusts. West and Wolfe (2018) report that there have been a number of accounts of financial impropriety by individuals within trusts and misuse of funds by boards of trustees. There have also been reports of poor governance in MATs and excessive salaries paid for the top executives (Ehren and Perryman, 2018), and in some cases, corruption (Thomson, 2020). It therefore became apparent post-2010 that there was a lack of capacity by the Secretary of State via the DFE to be able to realistically control so many schools and therefore regional school commissioners (RSCs) were appointed (Greany, 2015; Ehren and Godfrey, 2017; Ehren and Perryman, 2018). RSCs are DFE employees and are accountable to the National Schools Commissioner (West and Wolfe, 2018); their role is to administer the academies programme in eight regions and hold academy leaders to account regarding their performance.

With any phenomenon the current *picture* is often difficult to assess given that peer-reviewed work regarding the present period is limited. Riddell (2019) also concludes that the present situation regarding academisation is so ‘fluid’ that it generates uncertainty and

the many changes to the programme mean that there is not the distance required for 'authoritative academic comment'. We are therefore often reliant upon *grey literature*, such as media articles and government publications to ascertain the exact current position. One advantage of professional doctorate research is that students are on the *shopfloor* and can therefore potentially detect changes in the environment they work in sooner than academic researchers. Whilst the current *picture* is not clear, what appears to be happening is that the *tide* of academisation seems to have receded with the government reducing the reasons why schools can be forced into academisation (Department for Education, 2018). This has been accompanied by a plan by the DFE to merge stand-alone and small multi-academy trusts into larger trusts (Department for Education, 2016); the consensus appears to be that this is to make it easier for the DFE to administer their workload and hold CEOs to account more effectively. In addition, some of the larger trusts have been broken-up by the Department for Education to ensure that all schools within the network could be effectively supported (Ehren and Godfrey, 2017).

The aim of this chapter was to set out the rationale for the research and outline the policy context that primary sponsored headteachers act within. As has been identified, the introduction of academies can be seen to be part of a global phenomenon of decentralisation of education. In England, the reasons for this decentralisation are complex and will be explored in greater detail in chapter 2. Despite the fact that the phenomenon of academisation only began in 2000, and in its current form only from 2010, there have been many modifications to the initiative and the current manifestation of academies and structures are very different to those at the start of the programme.

#### **1.4.2 The increase of academisation in England**

As a result of the commitment of the Conservative Party to academisation, the government set about an ambitious programme to academise as many schools as possible and consequently by October 2018 there were 8,398 academies in England with 50.1% of all pupils in England taught in an academy or free schools (Department for Education, 2019b), an increase on the 203 schools that the coalition government inherited from Labour in 2010 (Department for Education, 2019a). The percentage of secondary schools that are now academies is 68%, whereas in the primary sector it is only 31% (Local Government Association, 2019). In 2017 it was calculated that 73% of all academies were within multi-academy trusts (MATs) (West and Wolfe, 2018), many of which will have designated 'sponsor' status. Table 1.1 identifies the breakdown of the number of academies by type of academy using the data from the DFE (Department for Education, 2019b). As can be seen, despite a great deal of the research into academies being focussed on secondary academies, especially at the beginning of the current academy programme in 2010, in fact the majority of academies are primary (although more pupils attend secondary academies than attend primary ones).

Type of academy	Number of academies
Primary converter	3,739
Primary sponsored	1,441
Primary free school	170
<b>Total primary academies</b>	<b>5,350</b>
Secondary converter	1,590
Secondary sponsored	725
Secondary free school	197
University technical college <sup>1</sup>	50
Studio school <sup>1</sup>	27
<b>Total secondary academies</b>	<b>2,589</b>
Special school academies <sup>2</sup>	331
Alternative provision academies <sup>3</sup>	128
<b>Total number of academies</b>	<b>8,398</b>

<sup>1</sup> Forms of secondary academies

<sup>2</sup> Schools for pupils with certain special educational needs

<sup>3</sup> Schools for pupils with significant behavioural issues

**Table 1.1. Number of academies by sector (October 2018)**

### 1.4.3 The variety of legal entities that academies belong to

Academies are either single entity school trusts (often referred to as ‘stand-alone’ academies), or schools within umbrella trusts (operating two or more schools but with loose centralised governance arrangements; often established by dioceses for church schools (Hill *et al.* 2012)) or, more commonly are academies within multi-academy trusts (again, operating two or more schools but with tighter central governance). Stand-alone and umbrella / multi-academy trusts are established as companies, limited by guarantee and

are 'exempt charities' (meaning that they do not need to register and be accountable to the Charity Commission). The groupings of schools within multi-academy trusts form a new aspect of what Ehren and Godfrey (2017) refer to as 'educational networks' and are an example of 'network governance.'

In multi-academy trusts the Department for Education has a single funding agreement with the MAT rather than with each individual school (Ehren and Perryman, 2018), as with stand-alone academies and each academy in an umbrella trust. Trusts are established by a small group of individuals referred to as the 'members', in line with charity rules, these individuals sit above the main board trustees. 'Members' establish the articles of association which govern the organisation and have certain powers including the ability to dismiss the board of trustees, other than that, their role is limited:

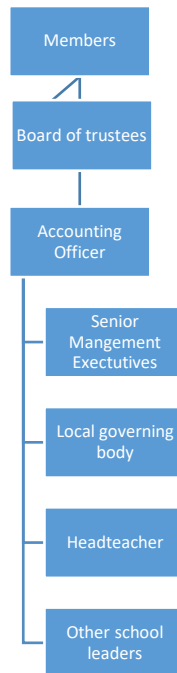
'While members hold the trust board to account for the effective governance of the trust, the members themselves have a minimal role in the actual running of the trust. It is the trust board, not the members, who are the organisation's key decision makers.'

(National Governance Association, 2019, p3)

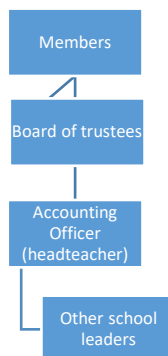
The composition of the 'members' and board of trustees is likely to be dominated by individuals connected to the trust type; therefore if the trust is a diocese there will be a significant number of diocesan representatives, whereas in a university led trust it will be university staff. It is the role of the board of trustees to set the strategic direction for the MAT and to hold the executive to account, especially regarding school standards and finance. Multi-academy trusts are run on a day-to-day basis by an *accounting officer*, often referred to as a chief executive officer (CEO) who is the operational leader (Baxter and

Floyd, 2019), and a chief finance officer (Male, 2017), whereas in stand-alone academies the daily running of the school normally still resides with the headteacher, although they are also the designated *accounting officer* for the trust. In MATs, beneath these two executive leaders there can be other Senior Management Executives (SMEs) (Chapman and Salokangas, 2012) such as Regional Directors (who have oversight of a number of schools within a locality) and executive headteachers (who are responsible for more than one school). In the majority of trusts, the individual schools retain their local governing bodies and some of the powers of the board of trustees are delegated to these academy governing bodies through a 'scheme of delegation'.

Figure 1.1 sets out the hierarchical structures normally seen within multi-academy trusts and figure 1.2 sets out the structure for stand-alone academies and umbrella trusts (although in umbrella trusts there will be more than one school under the members, each with a set of trustees).



**Figure 1.1. The hierarchical structure of a multi-academy trust**



**Figure 1.2. The hierarchical structure of schools within an umbrella trust**

Whilst stand-alone academies, umbrella trusts and multi-academy trusts developed concurrently there are implications through their structures for headteacher autonomy. As can be observe from the different structures outlined in figures 1.1 and 1.2, there can be numerous hierarchical levels within multi-academy trust, these will be examined in this thesis to see if this impacts upon accountability and reduced autonomy for headteachers.

#### **1.4.4 Sponsored multi-academy trusts**

At the commencement of the 2010 academy programme it was only schools identified as underperforming by the Department for Education (DFE) that were required to become academies under the control of multi-academy trust sponsors (not all MATs are awarded *sponsor status* by the DFE). At the start of the coalition government's academy programme it was not clear what the definition of an 'underperforming school' was but it was likely to include those schools below the government's now defunct *floor targets* (Department for Education, 2015a) (the minimum expectation of the attainment and progress schools should achieve), and those that have been found to be 'failing' by the English schools' inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). On occasions sponsored academies were also referred to as 'forced academies' as often school leaders were given no choice about their schools becoming academies; this is in contrast to 'converter academies' which are good or outstanding schools who have chosen to become an academy, although in contrast to the Grant Maintained programme it is governors who vote to convert their schools and not parents.

Post-2010 sponsored academies differ from those established under New Labour as there is now no requirement for the sponsor to part-fund the school and they are no longer primarily located in areas of deprivation. Importantly, from 2010 sponsored academies were not restricted to the secondary sector, as primary schools were then also able to academise (in the English education system, primary schools cater for pupils between the ages of three and eleven years of age, whereas secondary schools have pupils from eleven



to sixteen or eighteen years of age). The Department for Education (2015b) characterise an academy sponsor as:

‘...an organisation or person who has received approval from the Department for Education...to support an underperforming academy or group of academies. Sponsors work with the academies they support through the academy trust.’ (unnumbered)

The role of sponsors is to establish an academy trust and appoint the leadership team and governing body (of the trust); involve parents and ensure that the academy spends its funding appropriately; monitor the academy’s performance and take action where necessary and report this performance to the DFE (Department for Education, 2015b). Sponsored academies are therefore directly accountable to the Secretary of State rather than the LA.

Sponsors are perceived by the current government to be a ‘force for change’ and a ‘source of dynamism and expertise’ for schools where performance is shown to be poor (Woods and Simkins, 2014, p327). These sponsors can be businesses, sometimes referred to pejoratively as ‘edubusinesses’ (Hatcher, 2007, p607) or high performing schools; whilst other academies are run by universities, philanthropic individuals / groups, parents or local community groups. In addition, there are many trusts run by faith groups, the largest two being the Church of England and the Catholic church. Faith schools, previously the ‘backbone’ of public education in England prior to 1944 are now ‘reinvigorated and reimagined through their adaptations to the requirements of the market’ (Courtney, 2015, p814). Initially, there had been opposition to the academy programme by the Church of England, the largest sponsor of schools in the country. This opposition was overcome when

an agreement was made that land owned by the Church of England would not be transferred to individual governing bodies (Garner, 2011) and the doctrines of the Church of England were secured via a ‘memorandum of understanding’ developed in 2016.

Table 1.2 sets out the data released by the DFE (Department for Education, 2019c) showing the number of sponsors that they had designated up until January 2020 (1,128 sponsors) against each of the categories of sponsorship.

<b>Categories of sponsor</b>	<b>Number of sponsors per category</b>
<b>Academy converter schools</b>	779
<b>Business sector</b>	20
<b>Charitable sector</b>	77
<b>Diocese / archdiocese</b>	84
<b>Education business</b>	21
<b>Further education sector</b>	53
<b>Free schools</b>	13
<b>Government organisations</b>	3
<b>Independent schools</b>	5
<b>‘Other’ sponsors</b>	18
<b>Prospective academy converters</b>	33
<b>Pupil referral units</b>	1
<b>Sixth form colleges</b>	1
<b>Special schools</b>	9
<b>Universities</b>	11

**Table 1.2. Categorisation of sponsors and number of sponsors per category (January 2020)**

As can be seen from table 1.2, the largest group of sponsors is actually ‘other schools’ who are categorised as ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ (academy converter schools) by Ofsted. The number of schools sponsored by a MAT or umbrella trust varies from just one to over fifty; these MATs are sometimes known as ‘chains’, especially when they are large and have schools across the country and includes such organisations as Ark, Oasis, Harris and

Reach2. In endeavouring to define a 'sponsored academy', Courtney (2015) identified that there are now between 70 – 90 different types of schools in England, leading Woods and Simkins (2014) to reflect:

'Any attempt to categorize the types of school groups that are emerging is fraught with difficulty and needs to be constantly revisited as new patterns of provision emerge.' (Woods and Simkins, p332)

Categorisation of sponsored academies is very problematic for a number of reasons. At the commencement of the academies programme in 2010 it was clear, schools were either designated as 'sponsored', as they were 'forced' into academisation with a sponsor or they were 'converter' academies. Given the passage of time since the introduction of post-2010 academies many sponsored schools will now be graded as good or outstanding by Ofsted but are still classed as sponsored with potentially no ability to leave the sponsor, or as it has been described in the media, 'joining a multi-academy trust is like marriage without divorce' (Niemtus, 2016) with West and Wolfe (2018) using the following analogy:

'[The headteacher cannot] decide to leave the MAT (say to join another) any more than the manager in a local Tesco branch can decide one day that the store should become an Aldi.' (p19)

Equally, following a move by the government in 2016 to encourage all existing stand-alone academies and small MATs to become part of larger MATS, a number of stand-alone converter academies will have merged with larger MATs with sponsor status, although as Riddell (2019) acknowledges this may not always have been 'consensual'. Also, some of these previously designated 'good' schools may now be graded as 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' by Ofsted and therefore being run as if they are sponsored by their MAT, without the designation of 'sponsored'. As a result of the ambiguity over the term

‘sponsored’, in my study I have defined headteachers of sponsored schools as primary school headteachers whose school belongs to an academy trust that has been granted ‘sponsor’ status – this therefore means that some of the headteachers may run a converter academy, rather than a sponsored academy.

### **1.5 Structure of this thesis**

**Chapter 2 Literature review:** the literature review adds to the policy context section outlined in this chapter and discusses the contention that academies are seen as an extension of site-based management originating in the 1980s and now a global phenomenon. The political ideological roots and evolution of this phenomenon are then examined, including the influence of both politicians and the profession. The chapter concludes by identifying some of the gaps in the current literature regarding relationships between headteachers and their sponsors.

**Chapter 3 Methodology:** as discussed earlier, my research questions position my work within a phenomenological approach and this chapter explores the ontological and epistemological roots of the design. The chapter identifies that the fieldwork entailed the interviewing of eleven primary sponsored academy headteachers through semi-structured interviews – once coded and initial findings formulated, these were presented to a focus group of five primary academy headteachers. The chapter outlines how purposive, snowballing and convenience sampling were used to select participants. Given that the researcher is himself a leader of a sponsored primary trust the advantages of utilising a

reflexive methodology throughout my data analysis are discussed, which aimed to minimise the influence of any personal biases on my research.

**Chapter 4 Findings:** this chapter brings together the key findings of the research and synthesises this evidence to produce initial conclusions. The chapter concludes with an outline of the responses from the focus group which was given access to the findings in order to gain their perceptions and support validity of the empirical research.

**Chapter 5 Discussion:** the findings established in chapter 4 are further refined and used to develop two conceptual frameworks – it is hoped that this will provide a starting point for others to research the phenomenon of relationships between primary academy sponsored headteachers and their sponsors as currently there are no other conceptual frameworks that have been developed that cover the sector of primary colleagues specifically.

**Chapter 6 Conclusions and recommendations:** as the research within this thesis is for the award of a professional doctorate the evidence presented is discussed in regard to suggested recommendations for other professionals and I outline how the process of completing the doctorate has already helped in developing my own practice. There are limitations to my research which will be also set out, not least as the fieldwork does not claim to be generalisable.

## **Chapter 2**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter commences with an examination of the concept of site-based management, and the ideological development of the phenomenon, as publicly funded autonomous schools are seen as part of the site-based management process. As site-based management is often associated with decentralisation of policy / practice and the reduction in the role of middle-tier organisations, these are also explored. As this is a global phenomenon the literature is investigated to identify versions of the policy in other countries. Discussion is also held into the input that the teaching profession has had into the development of the policies linked to academy formation and expansion. The literature is also explored to examine the evidence for the efficacy of these schools and the evidence that this form of site-based management is actually increasing autonomy for headteachers in England. The key focus in this chapter is the critique of the current existing conceptual frameworks that have been developed regarding relationships that headteachers have with their sponsors, given a key aim of my research is to develop up-to-date frameworks to support the profession and academics. I also examine the literature regarding leadership in sponsored academies including the setting of vision and values; how academisation can fit within the concept of 'system leadership' and the accountability sponsored headteachers experience. The chapter concludes by moving into identifying the gaps in current knowledge regarding how primary sponsored headteachers experience their relationship with the sponsor.

A great deal of the existing research has centred on the effectiveness of academies in regard to pupil achievement and a major focus has been on the secondary education sector – this research is included but with the reservation that findings may not be directly transferable to my fieldwork. In addition, whilst this chapter relies heavily on academic, peer-reviewed research I have supplemented it with ‘grey literature’ such as some unpublished work, media articles, government reports and papers; this is to ensure that the review accurately reflects how the phenomenon is currently being experienced.

## **2.2 The global phenomenon of site-based management**

The sponsored academy model, as a form of publicly funded autonomous schools, was envisaged by the 2010 coalition government (Department for Education, 2010) to be a further extension of an on-going process of delivering education via site-based management, also referred to as ‘self-management’, ‘school-based management’ and ‘autonomy’. Site-based management is the phenomenon of delegating more decisions about the running of schools directly to school leadership teams instead of these decisions being taken by either central government or middle-tier organisations, such as local authorities in England. Currently, the phrase mostly commonly used in England by policy makers is ‘autonomy’ (Department for Education, 2010), a term also widely used by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2011). Maxwell (2018) cites Wohlstetter *et al.* (1995) in defining autonomy as:

‘The independence and self-determination of a community in its external and internal relations’ (Maxwell, 2018, p19)

Maxwell (2018) states that external autonomy involves freedom from local or national government laws; whereas internal autonomy is the ability of school leaders to adapt and develop systems to meet the requirements of their community. Salokangas and Ainscow (2018) succinctly cite the work of Caldwell (2016) on his reflection of autonomy:

“autonomy’, in the full sense of the word, is misleading, since a school in a system of public education can never be fully autonomous. Therefore, it is better to refer to a relatively high or relatively low level of autonomy, whilst being careful to specify the functions over which schools have secured more authority and responsibility.’ (p1)

Whilst ‘autonomy’ is widely used by English politicians and professionals, the international research, especially at its inception, more often refers to ‘site-based management’ and this will be the term I use mostly throughout this literature review. The reasons for the introduction and subsequent growth of site-based management are numerous and complex but a key driver has been the assumption by a number of governments that centralised education policy was having limited impact on school improvement (Ehren and Perryman, 2018). Smyth (2011) proffers an overview for site-based management:

‘Regardless of whatever local definition or particular national inflection was given to it, the broad argument behind the educational policy...that started in the 1980s was the dual alleged desires of making schools more responsive and accountable to parents, while removing schools from what was argued to be inefficient centralised control.’ (p96)

It is difficult to identify the genesis of site-based management as it appears to have been developing concurrently in a number of international education jurisdictions (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988; Smyth, 2011); one of the earliest references to site-based management being in 1976 when a form was piloted in Alberta, Canada (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988; Delaney, 1995). Caldwell and Spinks (1988) state that the ‘scope and nomenclature’ (p4) differed



around the world at the time of their publication and they termed the phenomenon 'self-managing schools'.

Site-based management is associated with the decentralisation of administration and / or moving power away from central government. In the education sector, Addi-Raccah and Gavish (2010) define this decentralisation as the 'transfer of power over educational policy and practice from the central authority to lower levels of authority' (p184). This does not necessarily mean transferring power directly to schools; for example, they show that in Israel decentralisation has taken the form of redistributing power from the national government to middle-tier organisations. Rather than referring to decentralisation of education in terms of delegating power over 'policy', Zajda (2006) is more nuanced in her definition of the phenomenon, describing it as 'the process of delegating power and responsibility concerning the distribution and the use of resources e.g. finance, human resources, and curriculum by the central government to local schools' (p11).

Site-based management is portrayed as a mechanism of neo-liberal approaches to difficult social issues. Neo-liberalism is a contested philosophy as there are so many interpretations of it, leading Ball (2012b) to state that he uses the term with 'trepidation'. He states that Sharmin (2008) expresses his view of neo-liberalism well:

'(Neoliberalism) is treated neither as a concrete economic doctrine nor as a definite set of political projects. Rather, I treat neoliberalism as a complex, often incoherent, unstable and even contradictory set of practices that are organized around a certain imagination of the 'market' as a basis for the universalisation of market-based social relations, with the corresponding penetration in almost every single aspect of our lives of the discourse and/or practice of commodification, capital-accumulation and

profit-making.’ (Shamir, 2008 cited in Ball, 2008, p5)

Globally, neo-liberal inspired policies have impacted upon the delivery of education through such mechanisms as the use of private companies rather than the state delivering education (in the form of part privatisation) (Ball and Youdell, 2007), and the creation of ‘markets’, where parents can select which ‘provider’ to educate their child – therefore the child’s education can be reimagined as a commodity. In addition, neo-liberalism has created a new vision and purpose for education, where education is seen as being more than just about the self-improvement of the individual, instead education is seen as a mechanism for training the next set of workers and entrepreneurs in order to support the development of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) as part of the development of a knowledge economy (Lundahl *et al*; 2013; Ellis, Steadman and Trippestad, 2019). Ball (2012b) contends that the effects of neo-liberal education policies, supported by such organisations as the World Bank and OECD, due to the perceived economic benefits of such policies, can be seen not only in England, but across the globe including in Australia, New Zealand, India and Chile, with elements emerging in 2012 in China, South East Asia, western African countries and across Europe. In Sweden for example the neo-liberal agenda climate was seen as pivotal to the formation of Free Schools there (Wiborg, 2010; Lundhal *et al*; 2013).

Supporters of neo-liberalism contend that the policies of the movement, including site-based management are solutions that are needed to tackle the ‘wicked social problems’ identified by Ball (2012b), such as the underperformance of disadvantaged pupils (Chapman and Salokangas, 2012); neo-liberals believe that these ‘wicked’ issues cannot be

solved through the approaches advocated by welfarism. Again, the term 'welfarism' is as highly contested as neo-liberalism (Gewirtz, 2002). The values of welfarism are argued by Gewirtz (2002) to have dominated educational thinking and practice in England in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, with the 1990s marking a move away from welfarism globally (Blackmore, 2004). The values of welfarism are explored by Gewirtz and Ball (2000):

'...equality of opportunity, valuing all children equally, equal and supportive relationships, caringness, child-centredness, comprehensive schooling, assimilationism, multiculturalism, anti-racism, girl-friendliness, anti-sexism, developing critical citizens, democratic participation and social transformation.' (p255)

Gewirtz (2002) contend that the welfarist-headteacher (leadership representative of the values of welfarism) has been replaced by a post-welfarism headteacher leadership approach of 'new managerialism' as managerialism is seen as a facet of neo-liberalism; although Gewirtz (2002) accepts that there are other ways of conceptualising leadership other than the polar approaches of welfarist v managerialism. Fitzsimons (2015) cites Enteman (1993) in developing his definition of managerialism as an:

'...international ideology on which rests the economic, social, and political order of advanced industrialized societies and from which arises the impoverished notion that societies are equivalent to the sum of the transactions made by the managements of organizations.' (p2)

The ideology of managerialism is that 'better management should lead to a better world, economically and socially' (Wright, 2001, p281). Managerialism is characterised by target-setting regimes, league tables and scrutiny of teachers' performance (Skinner, Leavey and Rothi, 2019). Ball and Youdell (2007) contend that the aspects of managerialism seen in education are a result of 'endogenous privatisation', involving the implementation of

business practices in an education setting. The emphasis of managerialism is on attaining a disciplined workforce through the implementation of management practices.

The move towards neo-liberalism with its multi-faceted approaches including managerialism, accountability and site-based management have been coined pejoratively by Sahlberg (2016) as 'GERM' - the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), a set of global policies aimed at addressing both new and old challenges facing public delivery of education (Cousin, 2019; Fuller and Stevenson, 2019).

### **2.3 Site-based management in England**

Since the mid-1980s, all state-funded schools in England have experienced some form of site-based management as a result of an increase in the finances delegated to them, thus allowing headteachers to directly take control over the resources identified by Zajda (2006), although there has been limited decentralisation of the curriculum, even in academies, despite this being a 'freedom' they have, as will be discussed later in this chapter. There has therefore been a transfer of power over some educational practice but not the educational policy identified by Addi-Raccah and Gavish (2010), as policy development has remained the preserve of the national government, including for academies, therefore the type of decentralisation given to all state schools in England can broadly be described as 'operational decentralisation' (Mohr, 1982, cited in Mukhtar, 2015). In the operational decentralisation model, the hierarchy (the Secretary of State) decentralises duties but retains the 'supervision' of that work. This is in contrast to 'true authority' which involves the hierarchy relinquishing their responsibility *and* supervision of

the sector. Therefore, the model of site-based management in England from 1986 onwards has been far from 'true' authority, in fact Greany and Higham (2018) refer to the type of autonomy given to school leaders in England as 'coercive autonomy' as a result of the external accountability pressures put in place by the government. Greany and Earley (2017) concluded that overtight accountability measures in fact 'flatten' the freedoms that governments encourage. This paradox of autonomy and control is referred to by Karlsen (2000) as 'decentralized centralism' (p525) and Sugrue (2009) refers to it as the 'twin policy towers' that are casting a 'shadow' (p373) across the educational space, not only in England but around the world. This 'control' by politicians in education is not a prerequisite as other high performing educational jurisdictions have shown e.g. Finland (Sahlberg, 2011). The model of decentralisation through site-based management seen in all schools in England, including academies, has therefore been far from the one proposed by Caldwell and Spinks (1988) who envisioned a system where headteachers would have autonomy over a raft of aspects such as curriculum, technology, people, finance and teaching and learning.

As section 2.2 identified, neo-liberalism has had a major influence on the development of site-based management globally, but it is not the only political ideology and agenda that has driven the development of the phenomenon in England. Ball (2007) as cited in Grimaldi and Serpieri (2010) describes reforms as often being:

'a set of trends which involve searches, discoveries, borrowing and struggles...which are...mediated through new discourses but also 'path dependent' and not as a 'single, conscious, explicit project.' (p76)

Given that political ideologies are relevant to the times and spaces when they were created (Bell and Stevenson, 2015), which have changed considerably over the thirty years since

site-based management commenced, the ideologies behind site-based management, and therefore academisation are numerous in this country. The evolution of site-based management in England needs to be considered in periods of political time; the period 1986-1997, which saw the introduction in England of the phenomenon under the Conservatives; the Labour administration of 1997-2010; and the period 2010 to the present with Conservative led governments.

Whilst the period 1986-1997 saw the commencement of site-based management in England, through initiatives such as LMS and Grant Maintained schools, the political ideological motivations behind its introduction are complex. Kenneth Baker (Secretary of State for Education under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher) has stated that rather than increasing headteachers' autonomy the primary aim for introducing site-based management was to 'punish' teaching unions and dismantle local authorities (Davies, 1999, cited in Smyth, 2011, p112). The 'punishment' referred to by Kenneth Baker was a consequence of teacher strikes and union orders for teachers not to cover the absences of colleagues in the 1980s; their disputes centred around issues such as pay, pensions, and the desire to establish a general teaching council in order to become self-governing (Jones, 2003). Prior to the 1980s, teaching unions had significant influence in the development of education policy. The moves by Baker started to see the demise of union influence over policy and the slow erosion of collective pay bargaining (eventually leading to unions being unable to negotiate a uniform approach with so many employers (Ball and Youdell, 2007)). Whilst the original intention of site-based management in England may have been a punitive measure against certain vested interests in education, its introduction was also

linked with the ideology of the 1979-1997 Conservative government of promoting neo-liberal policies, as the introduction of Grant Maintained schools (the first form of publicly funded autonomous schools in the late twentieth century in England) aimed to create a quasi-market environment for parents, allowing them choice within the education system.

In England the neo-liberal dimension to education policy continued under New Labour (1997-2010), with some subtle changes to encourage co-operation rather than competition, but the consensus is there were more continuities than discontinuities between Labour education policy and that of the previous Conservative government (Simkins 1999; Glatter, 2012), with Gewirtz (2002) describing their approach as 'neo-liberal authoritarian humanism' (p156). As such, Gewirtz (2002) contends that Labour combined the on-going neo-liberal movement with a direct approach to how this should be delivered by the government whilst also reinforcing the more humanistic aspects of education. Ball (2012b) refers to this phase under New Labour as 'post-neo-liberalism', where the state was, 'both reluctant and assertive, both shuffling off old responsibilities and defining and distributing new ones' (Ball, 2012b, p102). New Labour certainly embraced the market in education; during their tenure there was a proliferation of 'edubusinesses' (private companies enacting educational policy on behalf of the government) and the further development of site-based management for a limited number of headteachers through the introduction of secondary academies. Whilst neo-liberalism might have been adapted during the tenure of New Labour it certainly cannot be seen as 'post-neo-liberalism' as proposed by Ball (2012b).

The motivations of Michael Gove (Secretary of State for Education 2010 – 2014) in increasing site-based management from 2010 through the introduction of academies emanated from a variation of neo-liberalism. Finn (2015) describes Gove as a ‘restorationist conservative’; as such he was:

‘both a modernizer, keenly attuned to nuances of neo-liberal political economy and the spectre of globalization, and a restorationist, who sought to restore an imagined utopia through the machines of government.’

(p102)

In the case of schools, his belief was that education would be best delivered by non-government organisations, as it was at the inception of mass education in England in the nineteenth century. His restorationist philosophy was combined with the on-going political movements of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism in the English education space (Finn, 2015). This being said, Finn (2015) states that Gove was clear that many local authorities would not support a number of his proposals and therefore a significant expansion of academies allowed him to by-pass them. Gove was also inspired by publicly funded autonomous schools in other countries, in particular in two countries; the USA Charter Schools movement, which included elementary schools (equivalent to the primary sector of education in England) (Epple, Romano and Zimmer, 2016) and the Swedish Free Schools initiative (which was mainly located in upper secondary schools) (Wiborg, 2010; Dahlstedt and Fejes, 2020); as a result, Gove’s sponsored academies can be seen as an example of ‘policy borrowing’. Primary sponsored academies, as publicly funded autonomous schools, can therefore trace their roots back to USA Charter Schools, Swedish Free Schools, English Grant Maintained schools and New Labour secondary academies, although when Gove introduced academies into primary education in England it had been untested in this



country and therefore it was unknown if the phenomenon was transferable (Baxter and Floyd, 2019).

The systems associated with site-based management in England have often been imposed upon the profession and professionals have not been given a meaningful voice in consultations regarding developing the structures (Coghlan and Desurmont, 2007). It is claimed though that the teaching profession has been calling for more autonomy, in fact, as stated, as far back as the 1980s teaching unions were demanding the establishment of a general teaching council in order to be a self-governing profession as a means of securing autonomy (Jones, 2003).

Thomson (2010) hypothesised that leaders had been pressing for autonomy, as 'freedom' is a disposition (re)produced out of necessity by headteachers in a decentralised field in order to maintain or advance their relative positions in the 'field'. Thomson (2010) called for a Bourdieuan methodological study to be undertaken to confirm her hypothesis. Coldron *et al.* (2014) did just that and investigated leadership in the emerging academy sector following the commencement of post 2010 academies. They concluded that the mix of primary and secondary academy headteachers in their study were aiming for the best possible position for themselves and their schools, aiming to accumulate prestige (capital in all its forms). They also felt they were taking charge of their own destinies and were focused on realising the additional funding that academy status at that time afford them. Whilst Coldron *et al.* (2014) give an insight into headteacher motivations for academising their schools they do not claim their findings are generalisable; this is not surprising given

the small sample ( $n=15$ ) but also because they selected headteachers who were already being proactive in working more creatively, therefore these headteachers might not be representative of school leaders as a body. Coldron *et al.* (2014) also do not give an insight into whether these headteachers were pushing for more autonomy or merely taking advantage of that which was being offered to them by the government. What neither Thomson (2010) or Coldron *et al.* (2014) do is show that the call for increased autonomy was being generated from the main body of the teaching profession, rather it indicates potentially a small percentage of the profession wanted more autonomy i.e. school leaders, especially secondary school leaders.

Coldron *et al.* (2014) identified that headteachers were taking the opportunity for increased freedoms from central government / middle-tier local authorities through academisation, and the coalition government stated that academisation increases headteacher autonomy (Department for Education, 2010). The literature was therefore explored in several areas, including admissions and curriculum to examine if there is evidence that these freedoms are being realised by primary sponsored headteachers.

West and Wolfe (2018) claim that in fact seventy per cent of headteachers in schools that have academised have less freedom than they did before. In fact, West and Wolfe (2018) go on to state that schools run by a multi-academy trust have 'no freedom' and that any freedom the headteacher or the local governing body has is delegated to them by the MAT trustees:

‘...the situation is in some ways analogous to that for maintained schools prior to 1988 when the local authority had more control over the running of schools. In other words, academies run by MATs do not even have the autonomy and ability to make local (school-based) decisions which maintained schools enjoyed from 1988 (and still enjoy), and to which stand-alone academies still enjoy.’ (West and Wolfe, 2018, p17)

Caution needs to be exercised in regard to the finding of West and Wolfe (2018) that over 70% of academy headteachers now have less freedom than they previously had under LA maintained status as they have reached this figure through identifying how many academies are in MATs, rather than via empirical research into the freedoms they actually have. Whilst they are also correct in stating academies within MATs have ‘no freedoms’ (as any ‘freedoms’ rest with the sponsor rather than individual headteachers) this statement doesn’t reflect that in many MATs the board do pass on some of these freedoms to their individual academy headteachers (Hill *et al*; 2012).

One of the claimed ‘freedoms’ that academy headteachers have via academisation is the ability to set their own admissions criteria for their schools, albeit within rules set by the DFE. Greany and Higham (2018) highlighted that only 22% of the schools in their study of 699 academy leaders had changed their admission policy on conversion; although the study doesn’t indicate the percentage for primary schools, if these were sponsored academies and equally doesn’t state if such changes were to create greater equity or to be more selective. Evidence has not been located to identify if sponsors are delegating the power to administer admissions to their headteachers as it is the trust that is the admissions body and not the individual headteacher and school governing body.

Therefore, further evidence is required into this aspect regarding sponsored academy headteacher autonomy.

Headteachers also have the power to influence admissions through other less *overt* methods than changing their admissions codes. The process for co-ordinating admissions is still overseen by each local authority (West and Wolfe, 2018) and the Office of the Schools Adjudicator deals with complaints regarding the admissions processes across the maintained and academy sector; in their annual report in 2018 (Office of the Schools Adjudicator, 2018) they included evidence from local authorities who were having difficulties placing vulnerable pupils in academies due to the obstructive nature of some of academy headteachers, this gives an insight into some of the behaviours of academy headteachers to restrict admissions for certain pupils. Although interesting and relevant, the report of the Office of Schools Adjudicator does not state if these issues are linked to academies within sponsored multi-academy trusts but does suggest some academy headteachers are exercising autonomy over admissions, by being selective.

Schools can also be 'selective' through excluding certain groups of children post admission. Headlines in the press would certainly give the impression that academy headteachers / sponsors are using their power to exclude pupils more than headteachers in the maintained sector. For example, *The Guardian* ran with a headline of, 'she deserves an education: outcry as academy excludes 41% of pupils' (Perraudin and McIntyre, 2018). Exclusions are on the increase, as evidenced by the House of Common's Education Select Committee (2018). Despite the significant increase there is nothing within their report to

suggest that this increase has anything to do with the increase in academisation in England. Machin and Sandi (2018) undertook research into exclusions in academies in comparison to maintained schools and concluded that academies do exclude more pupils than in the maintained sector, although they attribute this to stricter disciplinary approaches being adopted in the academies rather than a strategic effort to improve the academy results through the exclusion of lower attaining pupils. Whilst enlightening, this report needs to be accessed with some caution as the study concentrated on pre-2010 academies, which the authors accept may have had more significant behaviour issues than post-2010 academies; in addition, the focus was on Year 11 pupils in secondary schools, rather than primary aged children – just as the article by Perraudin and McIntyre (2018) relates to secondary pupils. As with the evidence on admissions, further research is required to examine if sponsored primary academy headteachers are excluding more pupils to potentially ‘game’ the system (excluding pupils with expected low grades in national assessments in order to improve the school’s overall results), as although there has been research into headteachers gaming the system (Fuller, 2019; Thomson, 2020), I have found nothing specifically that relates to primary sponsored headteachers.

The coalition government cited data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), undertaken by the OECD, as one of its justifications for increasing site-based management through implementation of academisation as they claim the data indicates countries that give the most autonomy to school leaders are those that perform the best (Department for Education, 2010). Yet, when examined further the OECD claims are not so robust as first appears. Whilst their evidence appears to indicate a relationship

between the amount of autonomy a school system offers its schools over the curriculum and that system's performance, this relationship is less clear when examining the degree of autonomy afforded schools over the allocation of resources. Therefore, the evidence suggests that for site-based management to be successful on raising pupil achievement the government of that country needs to delegate both the curriculum and assessment procedures to headteachers. In England all LA maintained schools must follow the National Curriculum as a result of the 1988 Education Reform Act, therefore headteachers have limited autonomy over what is taught, as the government has already decreed the subjects in the curriculum and the outline of the content. Although all academies and Free Schools have the power under the 2010 Academies Act to divert from the National Curriculum Greany and Higham (2018) found that leaders, especially those in primary academies, felt that any freedom to be more flexible with the curriculum had been 'cancelled out' by such accountability measures as Ofsted and national assessments, in the case of primary academies these are the key stage 1 and 2 statutory teacher assessments (SATs) (assessments at the ages of 7 and 11 years). Cirin (2017), in a report commissioned by the DFE concluded that it was more likely that stand-alone academies would initiate innovation regarding the curriculum rather than academies which belonged to a MAT, with 58% of stand-alone academies changing the curriculum in comparison to only 28% of those schools within a multi-academy trust. Cirin (2017) goes on to state that whereas stand-alone academies are most likely to make changes to their curriculum, MATs (and therefore sponsors) are more likely to direct *how* the schools teach and deliver the curriculum. Therefore, the form of site-based management being offered in England may not have the impact the government and OECD intends as not all headteachers are adapting their

curriculum and assessment to meet their pupils' needs. The OECD recently reinforced this when their Director of Education and Skills stated that whilst England should be praised for its moves to autonomy, this autonomy was not being fully grasped by the profession (Whittaker, 2019). There is a dilemma here for sponsors of primary academies - do they delegate curriculum development directly to their headteachers or do they see the curriculum 'freedom' from the government as being to them, and for them as sponsors to decide on the best approaches – clearly the approach that the sponsor decides to take has a significant impact on the role of headteachers in their schools.

#### **2.4 The efficacy of publicly funded autonomous schools – a contested field**

Although the coalition government cited the positive impact of publicly funded autonomous schools from other educational jurisdictions (Department for Education, 2010), this efficacy is highly contested. In the USA, there was controversy from the off-set when publicly funded autonomous schools in the form of Charter Schools were introduced there, with researchers claiming the schools would be a drain on public resources and raising concerns about the ability of these schools to effectively support all communities, in particular minorities, lower-ability pupils and those with special educational needs (Epple, Romano and Zimmer, 2016). Despite there now being around two-million students attending Charter Schools, in 39 states and in 5,600 schools and receiving 'acclaim' from politicians, Knaak and Knaak (2013) claim the evidence of efficacy of the system is not borne out by research or evidential experience. This is reinforced by Rezullii and Roscigno (2007) who state:

‘The best studies suggest they are doing no better than traditional public schools—and are increasing racial segregation.’ (p31)

Bohte (2004) presented research though that did show that through stimulating competition in an area, Charter Schools could actually raise attainment in neighbouring non Charter Schools which he opines is as a result of these schools raising their game in order not to lose the income of students attending. In Sweden, Wiborg (2010) concluded that the ‘experiment’ there with publicly funded autonomous schools had been expensive and had not led to significant educational gains; in addition, she claims that the schools had increased inequalities, rather than decreasing them; similar conclusions were also reported by Lundahl *et al.* (2013). In New Zealand, their form of publicly funded autonomous schools were referred to as Partnership schools or kura hora. These schools were formed from 2012 but never flourished and consequently at the conclusion of the project there had only been seventeen schools established and these were brought back into state control in 2018 (Thrupp *et al.*; 2020); consequently, there is limited research into the efficacy of Partnership schools.

In England, the evidence around the efficacy of academies as a form of publicly funded autonomous schools has equally not been convincing at showing effectiveness of this form of schooling in a number of aspects, including school improvement, school effectiveness and community accountability. How to measure the impact of schools is a highly contested topic. ‘School improvement’ is a complex phenomenon in itself; a concept that has different meanings at different times (Murphy, 2013). Townsend (2007) cites Sprinks (1991) in distinguishing the difference between school improvement and school



effectiveness:

‘School effectiveness is concerned with results. Researchers try to describe certain variables for school success in measurable terms. On the other hand, school improvement places the accent on the process; here one finds a broad description of all the variables that play a role in a school improvement project.’ (Spinks, 1991, cited in Townsend, 2007, p4)

Greany (2018) cites Hargreaves and Fink (2004) in stating that school improvement should be sustainable and go beyond temporary gains and that improvement should have length depth and breadth, avoiding quick turnarounds. Greany (2018) therefore states that to really assess sustainable school improvement longitudinal studies are required. Given that the academies project has only been in its current manifestation for a maximum of ten years, and during that time it has changed significantly, there are very few research projects that can truly show the impact of the academy programme on school improvement over a sustained period of time.

Glatter (2012) cites evidence from a five-year study commissioned by the Labour government from PriceWaterhouseCoopers, which examined English academies as a form of site-based management and concluded that:

‘there is insufficient evidence to make a judgement about academies as a model for school improvement.’ (p565)

It should be noted that some of their data is based on the academies established by New Labour and therefore evidence from this research cannot necessarily be extrapolated to the subsequent models. The Education Policy Institute (Andrews *et al*; 2017) concluded that:

‘academies have not provided a panacea to school improvement.’ (p7)

In the neo-liberal educational space, pupil attainment is seen as a mark of the effectiveness of schools (Jenlink, 2017). In 2015 the Education Select Committee could not identify 'convincing evidence' of positive impact on attainment in primary schools (House of Commons Education Select Committee, 2015); although they did conclude that there is evidence that there has been an impact in academies that have been sponsored. The committee found that initial quantitative data suggests that sponsored academies do improve significantly at first, but then plateau when they reach national averages; this may be accountable to the fact that these schools started from a very low base. The Sutton Trust tracked the progress of pupils in sponsored academies through its 'Chain Effects' series between 2014 and 2018. The focus of the Sutton Trust research was on the impact of sponsorship on disadvantaged pupils; in its final publication in 2018 they concluded that the majority of chains had attainment for this group of pupils below the national average (Hutchings, Francis and Kirby, 2018). Whilst the work of Hutchings, Francis and Kirby (2018) is illuminating, it should be remembered that in the context of my research their findings relate to secondary age pupils and not primary.

The National Foundation for Educational Research, which since 2011 has been undertaking annual investigations into the impact of academies on behalf of the Local Government Association concluded in 2014:

'Pupils in sponsored academies that have been open for at least two years made more progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 including equivalents in 2013 than pupils in all non-academy schools, but made less relative progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 excluding equivalents.' (Worth, 2014, p9)

Worth (2014) though found secondary sponsored academies were putting more pupils through non-GCSE qualifications to inflate their overall scores; a fact that the government had to accept in a High Court case (Local Schools Network, 2015).

One of the most recent studies regarding the impact of academies on pupil performance was undertaken by the DFE itself, with the assistance of the Government Statistical Service (Hatton, Hampson and Drake, 2019); whilst this research was reviewed by an academic it cannot claim to be blind peer-reviewed. For primary academies the study concluded that the longer a primary school had been open with a sponsor the more likely it was that pupils would achieve 'similar' to the national average but it was found that some sponsored academies were performing less well than similar schools, therefore highlighting that the sponsored programme is not a 'cure-all' for underperforming schools. The study did try to make comparisons between performance over time of previously inadequate schools prior to academisation and those that had remained with the local authority; their study concluded that comparison was difficult as a result of the fact that sponsored academies in this group of schools were likely to have more significant challenges than the LA group as a result of higher levels of deprivation.

Bernardinelli *et al.* (2018) examined the achievement of pupils in MATs compared with those in stand-alone academies and maintained schools. This study concluded that there was no *significant* impact from being in a MAT although they did conclude that pupils in small and mid-sized MATs generally perform better than those pupils in similar maintained schools. They also found that pupils in primary MATs tend to perform better than those in

comparable stand-alone academies. The paper of Bernardinelli *et al.* (2018) was heavily reliant upon statistical comparisons of schools in MATs and they conclude that the limitations of their methodology restricted their ability to determine why the size of a MAT may impact upon its impact. Clearly, there is further research needed into the efficacy of sponsors in raising pupil attainment. In particular it will be interesting to examine the findings of Bernardinelli *et al.* (2018) with future studies to determine what variables may be in play to suggest that primary MAT schools perform better than comparable stand-alone academies – research is needed to see if this is as a result of effective leadership from the sponsor, or are these improvements emanating from the school leaders themselves.

Leithwood and Menzies (1998) indicated that site-based management can lead to increased community accountability; this is yet another highly contested aspect in the English system in relation to sponsored academies. Riddell (2019) in his study of two contrasting local authorities highlighted the concern by LAs that they feel they are the *only* organisation that can understand the local needs of an area and felt that they had a legitimate claim to have oversight of services for its residents. Large chains, especially those across regions are unlikely to be able to claim such an understanding of the community. West and Wolfe (2018) claim that taking academies out of LA control reduces the democratic nature of the system as local representatives are no longer accountable for education in their area, instead ‘distant sponsors’ unconnected to the community are responsible, although it should be noted that many sponsors will still be local and many will have retained local accountability in the form of local governing bodies. West and

Wolfe (2018) are correct in those trusts where the sponsor has taken-out local governing bodies, as parents with concerns about the quality of education in their child's school won't have recourse to these (Dickens, 2016). In addition, local councillors will not be accountable for academies in their area; although it is debatable how effective either of these mechanisms have been in holding governing bodies and LAs to account in the past as highlighted in an article written by Dickens (2019). Accountability in the education sector is clearly much wider than just the accountability to the local community as identified by Leithwood and Menzies (1998) and will be discussed in greater detail, in section 2.7.

### **2.5 Existing frameworks conceptualising the relationships headteachers have with their sponsors**

Conceptual frameworks are analytical tools that allow a range of outcomes and experiences to be considered against a consistent structure – effectively 'simplifying' the complex real world in a way that allows some general rules and models to be applied. Given that my empirical research is focussed on the relationships that sponsored primary headteachers have with their sponsors, it is conceptual frameworks associated with this phenomenon that I reviewed. There have been three significant papers that have helped to conceptualise our understanding of the new relationships that exist between English headteachers and their sponsors (Hill *et al*; 2012; Gibson, 2014; Greany, 2018), in addition, the unpublished conceptual framework developed by Carter (2017) supports our understanding. Whilst these conceptual frameworks are of relevance to my study, none of them actually conceptualise the specific relationships of primary academy headteachers

and their sponsors but they do give us insights which may be applicable to this set of headteachers.

Hill *et al.* (2012) undertook research into sponsored academies early in their inception and found that there was a spectrum appearing regarding the degree of control and influence sponsors were having over their individual academy headteachers, which they refer to as a ‘loose-to-tight spectrum’ (see table 2.1). Hill *et al.* (2012) use typology identified by Gunter and Ribbins (2003) in their mapping of education leadership, although not related to sponsored academisation. In the ‘loose model’ (informal collaboration) proffered by Hill *et al.* (2012), academies collaborate but there is no shared governance or leadership, this is in contrast to their ‘tight model’ (the pedagogical chain) where there is shared leadership and a shared pedagogical model, in such a model the degree of managerialism being delivered by the headteacher is likely to be high.



**A loose-to-tight spectrum**

<b>The informal collaboration</b>	<b>The family or partnership</b>	<b>The non-executive chain</b>	<b>The executive chain</b>	<b>The pedagogical chain</b>
Academies in the chain collaborate but there is no shared governance or leadership	Each academy has its own separate governance but academies share governance of some resources, services and support and leadership	Academies are part of the same academy trust / federation with some shared school-to-school support and services but each principal is separately accountable to their governors	Academies are part of the same academy trust / federation with executive leadership, management and school-to school and back office services	Academies are part of the same academy trust / federation with executive leadership, management and school-to school and back office services and a shared pedagogical model

**Table 2.1. A ‘loose-to-tight’ spectrum (after Hill *et al.*; 2012)**

Caution needs to be exercised in relation to the statement of Hill *et al.* (2012) that in an 'informal collaboration' there is no shared leadership; whilst there may not be executive leadership there would be leadership from the board of trustees which would be overseeing the schools within its 'chain', even if this was within an umbrella trust rather than a multi-academy trust, albeit this leadership may be limited. Hill *et al.* (2012) identified that these 'loose to tight' arrangements were not static, and sponsors were changing the approach to their individual schools as time proceeded. This concurs with Chapman (2013) who found that as this is such a rapidly changing landscape it was not possible to state the models of leadership that could be aligned to certain structural arrangements; what they did discover was that school context was the over-riding factor in determining the leadership arrangements that would be in place in an academy.

Although Hill *et al.* (2012) refer to the 'tight' model of academy chains as 'pedagogical chains' there is no evidence from their paper that this also means that 'pedagogical leadership' is being employed by school leaders in these institutions. Pedagogical leadership is perhaps now more widely referred to as 'instructional leadership' or 'learning centred leadership', which Bush and Glover (2014) state focuses 'primarily on the direction and purpose of leaders' influence; targeted at student learning via teachers' (p556). The findings of Hill *et al.* (2012) are limited in exploring what pedagogical influence chains are having upon their schools, referring only to the ARK chain. In their case study they state that there is an expectation that all ARK schools will use the same maths scheme (Maths Mastery), also explored in Junemann and Ball (2013); that their schools will devote a set number of hours to the teaching of literacy and numeracy; and all staff in their schools

must follow the same lesson plans. It could be argued that such approaches mean that headteachers actually have very little opportunity to practice 'instructional leadership', as the sponsor has already dictated the processes to follow. With such an approach there may be a risk that the headteacher has very little influence over what is actually taking place in their classrooms and could result in headteachers being unable to adapt processes to their context. This is concerning as Payne (2008) (cited in Chapman, 2013) claims that when leaders 'fail' to improve schools it can be a result of adopting decontextualised approaches (in addition to ahistorical and non-sociological methods).

The work of Hill *et al.* (2012) focused primarily on the pre-2010 secondary sponsored academies established under New Labour and therefore their typology may not be transferable to post-2010 primary academies. The continuum developed by Hill *et al.* (2012) also concentrates heavily on the structural arrangements in sponsored trusts rather than the impact of these structures on the relationships headteachers have with the trust. What is also missing is an examination of what specific duties the sponsor is taking away from the headteacher and undertaking at a MAT central level by the executive and their team.

Gibson (2014) undertook a study into the realisation of vision and ethos in nine sponsored pre-2010 academies (again, all secondary academies). He conceptualised the relationship that headteachers have with their sponsors as being on a continuum from *laissez faire* to *autocratic*, with those headteachers being in the middle of the continuum described as *democratic*; he acknowledges that this typology is 'borrowed' from Lewin, Lippitt and



White (1939). The conceptual framework outlined by Gibson (2014) is underdeveloped in his thesis and is omitted from his peer-reviewed paper (Gibson, 2015). The terminology employed by Gibson (2014) is certainly questionable now that we have greater evidence emerging into the sponsored academy sector. In particular, the term democratic is misleading as it gives the impression that stakeholders, including staff and the local community are involved in the development of trusts, whereas there is limited evidence of this. Equally, 'laissez-faire' gives the impression there is no control from sponsors.

Greany (2018) examined recent school structures and their impact on school improvement, including MATs with primary sponsored academies; his research helps in developing our understanding of headteacher relationships in the sponsored academy sector through shining a light on headteacher involvement in decision making. In his far-reaching research, Greany (2018) developed a typology to aid our understanding of the approaches to schools which MATs and federations go through: purpose; performance; participation; and process. All these aspects have implications for headteachers regarding the relationship they experience with the sponsor. For example, the contrast in involvement of headteachers in decision making ('participation') led Greany (2018) to conceptualise the decision-making processes in MATs by using a typology of paternalistic, transparent and directive. In his 'paternalistic' model senior executives in the trust make decisions based on the care they have for their schools, with one of the CEO participants describing the schools as a 'family' and the need to show them all 'love' but that certain schools might need more love depending where they were on their journey. This contrasts to those trust leaders who are very 'directive' and do not involve headteachers in their

decision making. In-between the 'paternalistic' and 'directive' models sit those leaders who consult, negotiate and co-design approaches based on shared values, referred to as a 'transparent' model. The approach that MATs take to school improvement is also categorised by Greany (2018) into one of three approaches: earned autonomy (where school leaders are left to develop their own school improvement strategies); school-to-school (where leaders and teachers from other schools within the MAT support one of the other schools); and centralised (where centrally employed staff support school development).

The ex-National School Commissioner, David Carter undertook a great deal of research into academisation during his time in office, although most of this was not published or academically reviewed. Shortly before the end of his tenure he undertook a national 'roadshow', speaking to headteachers and CEOs and conceptualised the autonomy that sponsors delegate to school leaders as being either 'standardised', 'aligned' or 'autonomous' (Carter, 2017). This typology was developed further by Greany (2018) with the following definitions (p81):

Standardised – 'a single' required approach that all schools must adopt;

Aligned - 'an agreed approach that is widely adopted, but on a voluntary basis;'

Autonomous – 'each individual school being able to decide its own approach.'

Greany (2018) accepts that the debate around standardising or allowing school leaders autonomy is 'polarised', with even a reluctance by some of the participants within his study to use the term 'standardised':

‘...proponents of standardisation argue that it allows for consistency and the application of proven approaches, while critics argue that it de-professionalises teachers and leaders and risks making all schools the same, with little scope for adaptation to context.’ (p81)

Greany (2018) goes on to outline the processes that are involved in the development of standardisation through either ‘co-design’ with headteachers, ‘organic’ development or being ‘rolled-out’ by the MAT; the most common aspects that are standardised across trusts are systems for pupil assessment and data reporting. The use of the term ‘autonomous’ by Greany (2018) is more nuanced than the definition of Carter (2017) as Greany (2018) accepts that this refers to certain practices within the school, whereas the implication from Carter (2017) is that headteachers have autonomy over all aspects of leadership. Greany (2018) found that often in operation within MATs was a ‘hybrid’ version where approaches were differentiated depending on the issue or the context of the school. As Greany (2018) highlights, what is being seen within the sponsored academy sector is the phenomenon of ‘earned autonomy’, which he states is contingent on performance and context, with lower performing schools having less autonomy and having to implement more standardised aspects dictated by the trust. As a result, he found that sponsored academy headteachers often had the least autonomy, with converter academy leaders having more, often because this had been promised to them as part of the deal when joining the trust.

Whilst the conclusions of Greany (2018) are very informative and help in our understanding of relationship between primary academy sponsors and their trusts, it should be noted that:

- his findings are reached through a synthesis of fieldwork entailing MAT central staff as well as headteachers, which contrasts to my study, which is of headteachers only;
- his research concentrates on ‘multi-school’ groups which included MATs, federations (two or more local authority schools working together with the same governing body) and Teaching School Alliances;
- the research involved headteachers in all sectors, and not just primary headteachers and the findings of the primary headteachers are not presented separately and we are therefore unable to extract the evidence regarding their understanding of the phenomenon;
- the MATs in his study include those without sponsor status.

The three conceptual frameworks presented by Hill *et al.* (2012), Gibson (2014) and Greany (2018) and the work of Carter (2017) provide us with contrasting ways of observing the phenomenon of sponsored academisation. It could easily be concluded that the different findings from these studies merely reflect four different lenses being used to examine the phenomenon; whilst this is correct, for example Hill *et al.* (2012) focusses on the structures associated with the phenomenon, whereas the lens of Gibson (2014) is focussed on the realisation of vision, and Carter (2017) and Greany (2018) give an insight into the autonomy experienced by headteachers, another consideration is the potential that these frameworks are different due to the phenomenon still developing and therefore the system examined by Hill *et al.* (2012) does not resemble the same system as that examined six years later by Greany (2018).

## 2.6 Leadership in sponsored academies

'School Leadership' is an extensive area of academic research and therefore in this section I propose to give the reader an overview of a number of aspects that have particular relevance in the sponsored academy sector that the headteachers in my study operate within. It is worth defining at the out-set the difference between the two terms 'leadership' and 'management' as they are occasionally used interchangeably whereas there are significant differences between the two, as highlighted by Davies (2009):

'Leadership is about direction-setting and inspiring others to make the journey to a new and improved state for the school. Management is concerned with efficiently operating in the current set of circumstances and planning in the shorter term for the school. Leadership is not the provenance of one individual but of a group of people who provide leadership in the school and, by doing so, provide support and inspiration to others to achieve the best for the children in their care.' (p2)

Hughes (2020) highlights the changing role of all headteachers in England from the 1980s; she states that research from the 1970s and 1980s shows primary headteachers were blending personal control with moral authority and the headteacher was 'pivotal, proprietorial and paternalistic' (p481) whereas by the 1990s there had been a move away from the traditional role of a headteacher because of the increasing demands of government. As a result, the headteacher moved from being *primus inter pares* ('first-amongst equals') (Peetz, 2015) to a more managerial role, in line with neo-liberal policies. Consequently, Hughes (2020) claims that headteachers' identities have changed both professionally and pedagogically.

There are numerous 'styles' of leadership, leading Earley and Greany (2020) to state:

'leadership' has been subject to fads and fashions: different approaches and conceptions have been dominant at different times.' (p47)

The expectation is that headteachers will now 'transform' schools, with 'transformational leadership' often lauded as the best leadership style to achieve this (Allix, 2000; Whitty *et al.*, 1998 cited in Gewirtz, 2002; Dumay and Galand, 2012; Nash and Bangert, 2014). Minckler (2014) cites Northouse (2007) in defining the concept as 'a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal'; Allix (2000) describes these 'goals' as *weapons* that headteachers utilise in conflict to, 'mobilize the motivations of followers' (p10). Transformational leadership is seen as *winning-hearts-and-minds* and entails bringing staff along over time through a belief in the goals and values set by the headteacher. Whilst currently, transformational leadership may be seen to be the optimum leadership style, Earley and Greany (2020) acknowledge that no one leadership style is effective in all contexts.

Transformational Leadership therefore is a mechanism for 'direction setting leadership practices' as defined by Sun and Leithwood (2015) – this includes the establishment of 'goals', 'vision' and 'mission' by school leaders. Gurley *et al.* (2015) contends that articulating and nurturing shared ownership and commitment in these aspects is essential to effective strategic planning for school improvement. Sun and Leithwood (2015) cite Locke and Latham (2002) in defining goals as the, 'object or aim of an action' (p502) whereas they cite Hallinger and Heck (2002) in defining 'vision' as:

‘...a source of inspiration for one’s own work and a catalyst which shape the actions of others.’

(Hallinger and Heck, 2002 cited in Sun and Leithwood, 2015, p502)

Cady *et al.* (2011) state that whilst most organisations, not just those in education, create mission statements and similar documentation, too much time is spent on the mechanical element of writing the statement rather than utilising that mission:

‘Typically, executives devote a tiny percentage of their time and effort to gaining understanding, a tiny percentage to creating alignment, and the vast majority to documenting and writing a statement. In fact, the distribution of time and effort should be nearly the opposite: *spend the vast majority of your time creating alignment.*’

(Collins, 2009 cited in Cady *et al.*; 2011, p63)

Cady *et al.* (2011) accept that there is confusion between several of the key terms in this debate, especially vision, values and mission. They claim that the confusion regarding these titles can cause managers and leaders to not properly use the mechanisms to improve their organisations. Gibson (2014) concluded that in the early stages of the inception of an academy it was the sponsor that developed the ethos and vision for the school, not the headteacher, this therefore has implications for headteacher autonomy and local democracy. He also concluded that many policies and procedures were developed at an executive level and it was the role of the headteacher to merely implement these. According to Gibson (2014), headteachers of sponsored schools are at risk of not being able to implement their own values, as a result they may lack influence over their staff as they don’t have the passion to use the sponsors’ values effectively. Of course, headteachers joining a MAT at the beginning of its inception may be able to bring some influence on these values at a MAT-wide level but headteachers who join existing chains that have already been through the processes of establishing the MAT’s values are clearly

at risk of not having input into the development of these collective values. Although Greany (2018) found that some MATs revisited these when new headteachers joined to create a sense of ownership and to ensure that they remained relevant as the MAT grew larger. Greany (2018) concluded from his large-scale study of MAT leaders and headteachers that 86% of headteachers in the study felt that their staff shared the vision of the trust and could articulate what this meant in practice. The evidence of Gibson (2014) and Greany (2018) suggests that it is trust leaders that are driving vision and values across their trusts, and although Greany (2018) gives examples of some headteachers participating in the development of these, this is not universal; this therefore has the potential to impact upon headteacher autonomy.

Research suggests that headteachers in sponsored academies might not be taking a strategic, long-term approach but be undertaking initiatives with short-term goals in mind and that their leadership style might not fit with the models of effective practice highlighted in other research, including transformational leadership. Chapman (2013) states that leadership in academy chains can be 'traditional' and shaped heavily by the leader's 'personality traits'. The findings of Chapman (2013) resonate with those of Hill *et al.* (2016) who interviewed 411 headteachers of English academies and their staff over a seven-year period. They concluded that within academies there are headteachers who they describe as 'surgeons', who use short-term strategies such as making staff cuts; focus on the oldest students in order to get their exam results up quickly; move the best staff into teaching exam years; and reduce class sizes whilst excluding poor performing students. Whilst illuminating, the findings of Hill *et al.* (2016) may not be generalisable to



the research in this thesis given their study commenced in 2009 before the current wave of academies and before the inception of primary academies, their evidence therefore only relates to leaders in secondary schools. The report also omits its methodology statement and does not reference all its claims; consequently, it cannot be evidenced if these headteachers were part of sponsored MATs.

Barker (2010) cited in Wright (2011) concludes that the ultimate focus of school leadership practice is in reality defined by the government, which Wright (2011) concludes leads to 'bastard leadership'; such leadership is bastardised i.e. a corrupted version of leadership. Wright (2003) states he believes that bastard leadership represents a 'capture of the leadership discourse' by the 'managerialist' project (p139). He later argued that school leaders cannot exercise leadership over values and direction of schooling as these are decided at a political level:

'Leadership as the moral and value underpinning for the direction of schools is being removed from those who work there. It is now very substantially located at the political level where it is not available for contestation, modification or adjustment to local variations. This 'bastard leadership' can also be understood as a form of managerialism.'

(Barker, 2010, cited in Wright, 2011, p347)

In sponsored academy trusts 'direction setting' leadership practices can therefore be seen to emanate from two bases – school leaders and trust-wide leaders (Gibson, 2014; Greany, 2018). Chapman and Salokangas (2012) refer to those in trust-wide leadership roles as Strategic Management Executives (SMEs), and the DFE refer to them as Senior Executive Leaders (Department for Education, 2019d); these individuals are often given titles such as Executive Headteacher, Executive Principal, Regional Director, Director of Education or

CEO; such leaders are those who previously might have extended their headteacher careers by taking on larger headships or moving into local authority roles but see a possibility of extending their vision and values through leading MATs (Chapman, 2013). SMEs fall within what is broadly described as 'system-leadership'. System leadership involves leaders taking on responsibility for more than one school; the OECD supports the use of system leaders to improve education (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008). In addition, above the SMEs there will also be a board of trustees who have a leadership role across the whole trust. Therefore, the direction of travel for a primary sponsored academy may be partly or fully set by SMEs and trustees of the trust instead of the headteacher, school governors and other school leaders.

As a consequence of the increase of SMEs leading school groups, those that *run* schools on a day-to-day basis are not always referred to as headteachers but may instead be referred to as 'Head of School' (Greany, 2018), indicating the ultimate authority resides with the SME. Greany (2018) found that Heads of School often have limited senior leadership experience as they usually emanate from the ranks of middle leaders and their role is mainly to concentrate on teaching and learning, with ultimate responsibility for the school's performance and finances resting with the executive headteacher. A consequence for Heads of School is that they are often removed from the higher levels of decision making within trusts as they often form the third or fourth tier down within trusts (Greany, 2018). School leaders in such an arrangement are likely to lead academies that fall towards the 'tight' end of control on the spectrum of academies identified in the typology formulated by Hill *et al.* (2012). Currently, there is little evidence identifying how Heads of

School in the 'tight' model experience the relationship with their sponsor - a power relationship where the Head of School is potentially subservient to a SME and could act in a role akin to a deputy headteacher role rather than a headteacher. Chapman (2013) reported that consequently some leaders of schools were starting to feel resentment towards their SME as they felt they provided poor value for money and were replicating some of the poorer aspects of local authority support. Some also felt demoralised at the new structural arrangements as:

'...joining an academy chain has reduced the power, autonomy, and status previously enjoyed as a head teacher, without reducing the pressures - indeed the pressure to succeed may seem even greater.'

(Chapman, 2013, p342)

Hughes (2020) undertook an ethnographic embedded study investigating leadership in multi-academy trusts. This was a case study of one CEO of a trust, and therefore the results are not generalisable. Hughes (2020) discovered that the CEO was operating at several levels, which were distinct from headteachers and executive headteachers, including as a policy networker. The influence of headteachers therefore on national policy may be ebbing away from them and transferring to CEOs. Greany and Ehren (2016) contend that the new ways of working for leaders in a MAT present 'cultural challenges', as headteachers, who have been used to 'running their own ship' now have to work with other professionals from within the MAT as equals in matrix-like structures. Ehren and Perryman (2018) highlight that some headteachers within MATs feel 'disempowered' through having to work in centralised systems as CEOs try to ensure control. Chapman (2013) hypothesised that in these new hierarchical arrangements headteachers have had to develop a new range of skills to navigate, including sophisticated social skills linked to

negotiation and brokering within a highly politicised environment. Chapman (2013) concluded that currently there is too little empirical research into the complexity of academy leadership and cites Glatter (2011) who argues that securing this evidence should be a priority; nine years on from Glatter (2011), evidence is accumulating but is by no means conclusive in regard to primary sponsored academy headteachers.

## **2.7 Accountability in the sponsored academy sector**

Hopmann (2008) refers to the education sector as being in the 'age of accountability' and Smith and Benavot (2019) commented that the term 'accountability' increased ten-fold in published research from 1965 to 2000. Despite its regular use in education it is still worth reflecting on what the term means. Biesta (2004) outlines that in general use the term 'accountability' refers to 'being answerable to' (Biesta, 2004, p234). Jenlink (2017) states that from the 1980s there has been a move from professional accountability, where educationalists saw it as their duty to be answerable to their students, parents and society, to a neo-liberal interpretation of a technical-managerial approach. Smith and Benavot (2019) contend that across the world governments have introduced accountability measures in education as a result of perceived inadequacies in systems; this they state manifests itself in two ways – through external monitoring of schools and teachers and secondly in greater emphasis being placed on pupil outcomes and results. Lundahl *et al.* (2013) summarise the reasons for increased accountability and the forms this has taken globally:

'Education has gradually become subject to closer scrutiny and evaluation, in order to ensure that schools 'perform', 'produce' or 'deliver' sufficiently

well, and the role of the principal has, accordingly, changed from being a pedagogical leader to a manager. Various control techniques have been introduced in the name of quality assurance, including standards, assessments, audits, benchmarks and indicators, and international comparisons of performance and outcomes have become increasingly important.’ (p503)

Ehren and Godfrey (2017) cite the definition of accountability proffered by Klijn and Koppejan (2004):

‘the extent to which actors (accounters: those rendering accounts) are held accountable for their behaviour and performance by other actors (accountees: those to whom account is rendered).’

(Ehren and Godfrey, 2017, p343)

In the context of my research, the ‘accounters’ can be seen to be the headteachers, who in-turn hold their staff to account for their performance. The ‘accountees’ is less clear, as there are many actors that sponsored headteachers are accountable to. These include external actors: Ofsted, and Regional School Commissioners (Ehren and Godfrey, 2017); and internal actors: Senior Management Executives within the MAT, school-based governors, and their local community (pupils, parents and local stakeholders). Greany (2018) concluded that leaders within academy trusts are now held to account in different ways, with CEOs, executive headteachers, regional directors and others undertaking this role; he also reflected that this role is difficult as there is a balance to be achieved between supporting and holding leaders to account without the risk of developing a ‘dependency culture’.

These accountees use a range of ‘accountability mechanisms’ to hold their accounters to account (procedures, instruments and arrangements) (Klijn and Koppejjan, 2014 cited in

Ehren and Godfrey, 2017). Such mechanisms include headteacher performance management instruments using such measures as standardised national assessments and outcomes of Ofsted inspections to infer how effective headteachers have been in their roles. Ehren and Godfrey (2017) highlight that despite sponsored academies being members of a governance network it is the individual schools that are more closely held to account than the network as a whole. Whilst Ofsted has lobbied the government to undertake inspections of MATs as a whole, these calls have currently been rejected meaning that the inspectorate only has MAT focused reviews (Ofsted reviews of the effectiveness of MATs) as an option available to them; although, Ehren and Godfrey (2017) highlight that as MATs are so varied in their compositions and roles accountability at the network level is fraught with difficulties.

Ehren and Perryman (2018) developed a conceptual framework for examining the network governance arrangements associated with a multi-academy trust which outlines the complex accountability that sponsored headteachers may experience. In their conceptualisation they see accountability in MATs being focussed on four loci: the *individual, organizational (sic), network and community*. At the individual accountability level, the individual's contribution to the *network* is measured through such mechanisms as performance management. *Organizational accountability* examines the impact of the school on the network through a number of mechanisms:

‘...such as through internal school-evaluation, peer review, school inspections or high stakes testing and the publication of league tables...’  
(Ehren and Perryman, 2018, p950)

As the quote above from Ehren and Perryman (2018) illustrates, some of the accountability measures at an *organisational level* are linked to being a member of the sponsor network such as peer reviews (headteachers reviewing each other's schools, usually at the behest of the sponsor) and the Ofsted MAT reviews. At a *network level* the effectiveness of a MAT can be assessed in regard to the synergy between schools, its transformational impact and the efficiencies it creates. Ehren and Perryman (2018) conclude by defining *community accountability* measures – the impact of the MAT on the community it was set-up to support. Such community accountability measures are identified as improved employment rates within the community, improved social cohesion and declines in crime rates. As the research of Ehren and Perryman (2018) highlights, for the primary sponsored headteacher the levels of accountability can be much more complex and onerous than for the LA maintained headteacher. The headteacher in a primary sponsored MAT can be seen to have to be accountable in each of the four dimensions outlined by Ehren and Perryman (2018). They will be held accountable by their sponsor in a number of ways: delivering improvements for their community; how effective they are at supporting the other schools within the network and facilitating synergy; and measured in regard to their contribution to the organisation's data in regard to Ofsted outcomes and national pupil assessments.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

Despite the paucity of empirical research citing the benefits of site-based management, policy makers in many global jurisdictions appear committed to the new structures associated with it and in recent years have extended its reach through the introduction of

publicly funded autonomous schools. In England, this commitment by politicians is likely to be a result of the reports of several think-tanks, such as the Policy Exchange, purporting to their impact in a very compelling manner (Chapman and Salokangas, 2012). At the political level in the English system it is clear that there is a contradiction; a belief by some politicians that decentralisation through academisation is an effective mechanism for improving schools, not only based on their commitment to the research from the OECD, extolling the virtues of site-based management, but also combined with political ideologies driving the agenda; yet politicians in England feel the need to retain control of education as seen through the accountability measures put in place.

The literature has shown how contested the efficacy of academisation is; from one perspective, sponsored academies can be viewed as the natural conclusion of the site-based management agenda that commenced in England in the mid-1980s; equally, they can be judged as the antithesis of the movement in that for some sponsored headteachers they have potentially been left with less autonomy than their contemporaries in the 1980s.

## **2.9 Gaps in the existing literature**

Having examined the available literature, there are clearly gaps or limited evidence in the knowledge that exists regarding how sponsored academisation is being experienced in England, especially in the primary sector and the relationships that are evolving between headteachers and their sponsors. From this literature review the perceived gaps in our knowledge of sponsored academy leadership are:



- how headteachers in this sector are being held to account;
- do headteachers in *primary* sponsored academies have autonomy to develop their own vision and implement their own curriculum and assessment procedures;
- who takes the lead in running these schools, the headteacher or the sponsor via their central staff;
- how 'trust' is being experienced by primary sponsored headteachers in relation to their relationship with the sponsor;
- what different types of relationships and behaviours are being exhibited by leaders and sponsors within the primary sector.

These gaps in the literature formed the basis of the research questions in my research and these questions are explored in depth in chapter 3.

## **Chapter 3**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter sets out the methodology employed to undertake the fieldwork within this thesis to develop an understanding of the relationships experienced by a group of primary school headteachers of their sponsors in England. As the fieldwork was designed to identify the personal experiences of a group of headteachers I will outline why the research questions I developed called for a qualitative approach to studying the group and will discuss the ontological and epistemological roots of the paradigm the research falls within; this leads on to discussion regarding the use of a phenomenological research design and accompanying methods. In the sampling method section I will outline the two distinct phases of data collection that I entered and how I selected the participants for these phases, including how my methods utilised purposive, snowballing, and convenience techniques. Whilst the rigour of the research methods and design are extremely important in the validity of the data produced, and will be outlined, so are the methods employed to analyse and display the data and will be discussed. If the reader is to have confidence in the research they need to understand the positionality of the researcher and be clear if the findings are transferable; I will set out how my methodology should ensure that the reader has confidence in my findings, this will be through being transparent and presenting a rich description of the sample. Like all 'real world' research, there were ethical issues that had to be taken into account when undertaking this research, which are explored.

As previously identified, the overarching aim of my empirical study in this thesis is **to understand the relationships that sponsored primary headteachers have with their academy trusts in England**. As outlined in chapter 2, the literature review has helped in the formulation of the following research questions:

- Is leadership 'shared' between the sponsor and the headteacher?
- Can sponsored headteachers establish their own vision and values in their academies?
- How do primary headteachers in sponsored academies perceive their relationship with their sponsor?

Whilst I have aimed to make these research questions clear, there are some aspects that I wish to elaborate upon for clarification for the reader. Firstly, the first question seeks to explore if leadership is being 'shared' between the sponsor and headteachers in primary academies. I decided to use the phrase 'shared' instead of 'distributed' as in education 'distributed leadership' is a term used in relation to an approach to leading schools, involving headteachers delegating responsibility to other leaders. I also avoided the term 'devolved' as in the sponsored academy sector this has specific connotations with how the trust devolves power to local governing bodies through the scheme of delegation. In the third research question I employ the term 'perceive'; my research aims to bring meaning to relationships and I asked participants to reflect on their relationship with the sponsor through the systems put in place by the sponsor, the conversations they have, their thoughts on autonomy and their reflections on their accountability in order to bring

meaning to these different elements to characterise their relationship in its totality; it is these perceptions of headteachers that I am drawing upon in my research.

The objectives of my research are:

- to support the profession and academics in conceptualising the current manifestation of sponsored academisation in the primary sector through the development of new frameworks;
- to provide policy makers and fellow professionals with increased knowledge regarding the relationships primary headteachers have with their sponsored academy trusts in order that these relationships can be positive for the benefit of the trusts, staff and pupils;
- to support my own professional development, in particular in developing my role as CEO of a multi-academy trust.

My objectives are grounded in my professional role and the potential impact of the research on other professionals within my field of work. This is as a result of this research forming part of the qualification of a professional doctorate that seeks to link theory, research and professional practice. This chapter now explores how my research design allowed answers to my research questions to be elicited from the participants; it does so by first locating the work in a research paradigm.

### **3.2 Locating the research within a paradigm**

In positioning my research in a paradigm there is a need to first reflect on the nature of educational research and locate my work in ontological and epistemological foundations. Wellington (2000) defines ontology as the differing beliefs around the nature of reality; he goes on to define epistemology as the routes to acquiring knowledge. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) contend that ontology, epistemology, methodology, and therefore method are all interlinked, as ontological assumptions give rise to epistemological assumptions and then to methodological perspectives. In their work they distinguish between two possible ontological starting points – a nominalist ontology, more commonly known as a relativist ontology (objects of thought are merely words and that there is no independently accessible ‘thing’ constituting the meaning of a word); or a realist ontology (objects have an independent existence and are not dependent for it on the knower). Whilst the binary approach presented by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) is one perspective, it is not the only one and Guba and Lincoln (1994) outline a number of ontological perspectives including ‘naïve realism’, ‘critical realism’ and ‘historical realism’. I align myself with the binary approach proffered by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) as this is how I perceive the development of knowledge, whilst accepting there are other approaches available to the researcher.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) state that if one begins with a relativist ontology it naturally leads to an anti-positivist epistemology (involving qualitative data); if though the researcher starts with a realist ontology, the epistemological assumptions become

positivist (using quantitative data). Similarly, to their discussion on ontology, Guba and Lincoln (1994) identify that there is an epistemological 'spectrum' regarding how researchers can explore knowledge, and not just the two perspectives presented by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000). Wellington (2000) also argues that this division is unnecessary, as he feels that knowledge is the synthesis of the two approaches, often referred to as a 'mixed-methods' approach. I concur with Wellington (2000) in believing that the researcher should use the tools that best fits their research questions and therefore at times I believe that a mixed-methods approach is appropriate, although I have elected to follow a purely qualitative approach in this research.

When examining the ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches to follow, the researcher has two possible starting routes: the so-called paradigm-driven or pragmatic approaches. Guba and Lincoln (1994) define a paradigm as:

'...the belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method, but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways.' (p105)

In contrast, the pragmatic-approach (Punch, 2009), which has its roots in American research history (Robson, 2011), entails the researcher starting with the research questions and then choosing the most appropriate methods to answer them. Robson (2011) contends that for pragmatists the truth is '*what works*'. It is the pragmatic-approach that I align myself to, as I believe it should be the research questions that dictate the route the researcher should take.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) identify four competing paradigms related to enquiry: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory *et al.* and constructivism. Whereas, Heron and Reason (1997) contend that Guba and Lincoln's constructivism paradigm fails to take into account 'experiential knowing'; they therefore replace this paradigm with a 'participatory paradigm' (with a subjective-objective reality ontology). Equally, Lather (2006) refers to a 'deconstructivist' paradigm and advocates a multiplicity of paradigms (calling for a 'thousand paradigms', as he paraphrases the cited work of Deleuze); whereas Hammersley (2012) states many academics feel that 'methodological-pluralism' has reached undesirable levels and argues for greater methodological consensus in educational research. Rather than refer to paradigms, Hammersley (2012) uses the term 'methodological philosophies' and has a slightly different typology. He contends that there are four main methodological philosophies; positivist / post-positivist; critical; constructionism; and interpretivism.

As can be seen, paradigms and educational research generally is a highly contested field which all researchers must navigate in order to develop their own understanding and develop an approach that *best* fits with their research aims and questions. I contend that the questions that frame my research position the research within a relativist ontology and an anti-positivist epistemology, specifically a subjective epistemology (standards of rational belief are those of the individual believer or their community) and that my research is located within an interpretive paradigm. An interpretative paradigm focuses on how the social world is interpreted by those involved in it (Robson, 2011). From an interpretive perspective, the hope of a universal theory is replaced with multifaceted

images of human behaviour as varied as the situations and contexts supporting them (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). In the case of my research, this paradigm acknowledges that the knowledge regarding the experiences of primary school headteachers working for sponsored trusts doesn't have an 'independent existence', and therefore the knowledge of the phenomenon is dependent on the knower. This paradigm allows me to gain understanding of the meaning behind the social phenomenon through the use of qualitative rather than quantitative data.

### **3.3 Research design**

The interpretive researcher is presented with a number of possible methodologies to employ, including hermeneutics, phenomenology, pragmatism and symbolic interaction. I elected to use a phenomenological methodology as my research questions focus on the experiences of individuals (the experiences and perceptions of a sample of primary academy headteachers employed by sponsors), and the phenomenological approach aims to *describe* how phenomena are experienced at first hand by those that are involved with it, as it deals with people's perceptions, meanings, attitudes, beliefs, feelings and emotions (Denscombe, 2007). This 'description' culminates in the essence of the experience of the phenomenon as lived by the participants (Creswell, 2014).

The word 'phenomenology' is a composite of two Greek words – *phainomenon* and *logos*, therefore the word means to give an account (*logos*) of a phenomenon (*phainomenon*) (Sokolowski, 2000). The phenomenological researcher acknowledges that these 'accounts'



may vary, as the social world is socially constructed and therefore individuals may see the same phenomenon in different ways, in line with relativist ontology which argues that there can be multiple realities. The phenomenologist's role is not to interpret the experiences of the participants, but to present them as accurately as possible (Denscombe, 2007); this does not mean that the role of the researcher is merely to describe those experiences, instead it is to analyse the experiences and bring meaning to them through close deconstruction of what was observed without giving an interpretation of the meaning that may be considered inaccurate.

### **3.4 Objectivity, positionality and validity**

#### Objectivity

For researchers it is important that they are objective by ensuring that they are free from 'bias or partiality' (Gibbs, 2007, p36) although Gibbs (2007) accepts that the researcher, 'cannot claim to be an objective, authoritative, politically neutral observer standing outside and above the text of their research reports' (Gibbs, 2007, p91). For an interpretive researcher the aim is to be free from bias and partiality, but they are realistic and accept researchers do have biases and must acknowledge these. Phenomenology takes as its underlying principles that 'to know is to see, and to see is to look beyond constructions, preconceptions, and assumptions' (Gearing, 2004, p1430). To achieve this Gearing (2004) states the researcher needs to undertake phenomenological reduction, epoche or bracketing; although there are some philosophical differences in these three aspects the terms are generally seen as being interchangeable in research (Gearing, 2004), although

bracketing is the most commonly used term by researchers. Bracketing involves setting aside 'taken-for-granted assumptions' (Lester, 1999, p1). Therefore, the researcher needs to suspend their own beliefs and place the world and the things in the world into 'brackets'. By doing this we can consider the aspect as it was intended rather than a mere appearance, allowing the researcher to see its correlation to the phenomenon (Sokolowski, 2000). Robson (2011) approaches bracketing in a slightly different manner to Lester (1999) in that he accepts that the researcher has biases, assumptions and preconceptions and therefore must explain them and integrate them into the research findings. This concurs with Gibbs (2007); despite the researcher's best intentions to bracket presuppositions, prejudices and preliminary ideas about a phenomenon, Gibbs (2007) accepts that a complete *tabula rasa* approach is unrealistic. My intention is to take a pragmatic perspective on 'bracketing' (Gearing, 2004; King 2014); King (2014) outlines that this can be achieved through acknowledging the researcher's experiences and opinions to the reader (see section 1.2 and positionality section below) rather than trying to eliminate them:

'In order to be as objective as possible in bracketing, the researcher must initially define their concerns and explain their worldview, which can be achieved through a process of critical self-reflection. Experience should not be denied, but rather made explicit to the reader for inspection when validating the study.' (p171)

The use of a reflexive methodology throughout the data analysis stage aimed to minimise the influence of any biases on my research and ensure the findings were objective. Reflexivity is the process by which a researcher reflects on themselves as a researcher, the aim of this is to provide effective and impartial analysis of the data. Reflexivity is a key process for the phenomenological researcher. Such a reflexive methodology in my thesis

included asking participants to read through their anonymised transcripts in order to mitigate my positionality impacting on how I transcribed their accounts. In addition, my initial conclusions were presented to a group of different academy headteachers as a focus group to examine if they resonated with them, ensuring that bias had not entered my findings. My research supervisors were also used to ensure reflexivity. I have therefore aimed to be rigorous and objective in my research and supervision sessions have helped in this aspect, but it will be for the reader to decide if they think I have been successful in my objectivity.

#### Establishing my positionality

In order to ensure objectivity, further discussion is needed regarding me as researcher within this study in order to be objective and clear on my positionality; this will support phenomenological reduction (bracketing). For increased clarity, my 'position' regarding academisation and sponsorship is as follows:

Over time my personal philosophies have changed regarding academisation and sponsorship. I have moved from being a staunch advocate of LA-led-education to one that is more positive about academisation. This more 'pro-academy' position is not borne out of a desire to see the removal of LA control or for political motivations, rather it emanates from a concern regarding the lack of effectiveness of local authorities in recent years as a result of significant reductions in funding as a consequence of austerity cuts. Equally, the more positive stance I now have towards academisation does not mean I adopt an

uncritical stance towards issues within the academy model; for example I am concerned about the high salaries paid to some CEOs; aspects of corruption (Thomson, 2020); and the practices of some faith organisations who run schools. My experience of leading a school that was a sponsored academy though was almost identical to that in a mainstream setting. Yet I am conscious that the manner my sponsor approached managing its academies and the relationship it had with its headteachers may contrast to that of other sponsors.

Since commencing the role of Chief Executive Officer within an expanding sponsored trust I have been acutely aware of the frustrations and challenges facing both the headteachers within my trust and fellow CEOs. The major frustration for me has been trying to strike the balance as a previous headteacher in preserving headteacher autonomy and the uniqueness of each school in my trust whilst balancing this with my responsibilities to the board and the DFE in ensuring good provision in each school; therefore in the three years that I have been in post the trust has moved to a more 'aligned' approach (Greany, 2018) through the adoption of consistent systems across all schools within the Trust to allow more control of the schools from the centre in order to influence performance in those schools.

### Validity

Robson (2002) states that validity concerns whether the findings of the research are, '*really about what they appear to be about*'. Moses and Knutsen (2007) breakdown validity into '*internal validity*' (tight control of the variables in order that with confidence one can state

that correlation equals causation), and '*external validity*' (how far the research can be generalised into the wider world). Punch (2009) makes it clear that validity has different meanings dependent upon if a qualitative or quantitative measure is being employed. Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that validity in qualitative research is better approached through a different set of lenses to those of 'internal' and 'external' validity; rather than referring to 'validity' they use the term 'trustworthiness' which they state has four aspects:

Credibility – there needs to be confidence in the 'truth' of the findings;

Transferability – how the findings can be applied in different contexts;

Dependability – ability to show that the findings are consistent and could be repeated;

Confirmability – reassurance that the findings are based on neutrality and have been shaped by the participants and not based on bias, motivation or interests.

Shenton (2004) précises these criteria as follows:

'In addressing credibility, investigators attempt to demonstrate that a true picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny is being presented. To allow transferability, they provide sufficient detail of the context of the fieldwork for a reader to be able to decide whether the prevailing environment is similar to another situation with which he or she is familiar and whether the findings can justifiably be applied to the other setting. The meeting of the dependability criterion is difficult in qualitative work, although researchers should at least strive to enable a future investigator to repeat the study. Finally, to achieve confirmability, researchers must take steps to demonstrate that findings emerge from the data and not their own predispositions.' (Shenton, 2004, p63)

Using the criteria presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985) I believe that the research in this thesis can pass their 'trustworthiness' tests and the methodology has been developed to give the reader reassurance that they are met in the following ways:

**Credibility** – summaries of some of the interviews that I have undertaken are within appendix A to reassure the reader that my findings are based on evidence from the participants;

**Transferability** – the methodology employed has been clearly outlined in this chapter to allow other researchers to consider if the findings can be transferred to different contexts; the research has led to the development of conceptual frameworks which it is hope other researchers will be able to use to understand the phenomenon further;

**Dependability** – the sampling process has been clearly articulated and information about each of the schools and headteachers presented in order that other researchers could aim to select a similar or contrasting sample to examine how their findings relate to those in this thesis;

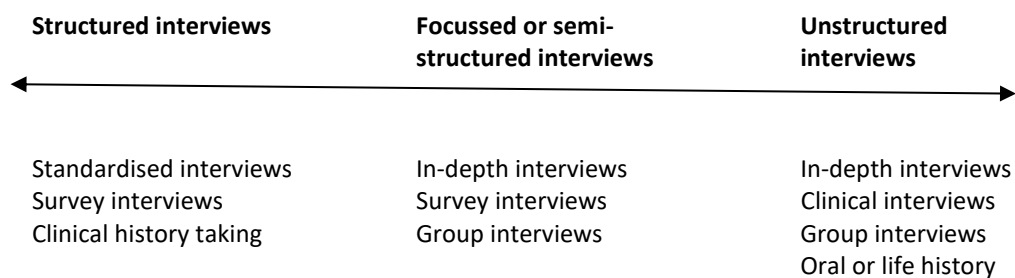
**Confirmability** – whilst bracketing in a phenomenological research project aims to remove biases there can be no guarantee that this has been achieved. Therefore the reflexive nature of my research and the positionality that I articulate throughout the thesis is to give reassurance to the reader that every attempt was made to achieve ‘confirmability’; use of my supervisors throughout the process also allowed them to check that my findings were based on neutrality.

It will be for the reader to determine if they feel that the evidence I have presented does give them the reassurance of ‘trustworthiness’ in line with Lincoln and Guba (1985).

### 3.5 Data collection

Having examined the different research methods available to the interpretivist researcher including the use of questionnaires, surveys, textual or visual analysis (for example through the use of Ofsted reports) and observations, I decided that the most relevant was the utilisation of interviews as this would allow the participants to present their experiences to me in detail. The use of interviews as a research method has both a number of advantages and disadvantages compared to other methods such as questionnaires and surveys (Oppenheim, 1992). Advantages include the ability of the interviewer to adapt the questions in light of the responses of the participants, but a significant disadvantage is that they can be very time consuming and it can be difficult to gain the co-operation of participants to engage in a lengthy interview process (Robson, 2011). The difficulty in recruiting participants was certainly an issue in my research, as will be discussed in section 3.6 (sampling method).

Having selected that interviews would be my research collection tool I needed to examine the different types of interviews. Punch (2009) cites the work of Minichiello *et al.* (1990) and produced a table based on their work, identifying a continuum model for interviews (table 3.1). On the left-hand side of the continuum interviews are tightly structured and standardised, in contrast to those on the right, which are unstructured and open-ended. Structured interviews have planned questions whilst unstructured interviews do not and will therefore not be standardised. Punch (2009) states that the researcher needs to select the interview type appropriate to their research purposes and their central questions.



**Table 3.1. The continuum model for interviews (after Punch, 2009)**

Although Denscombe (2007) believes that unstructured interviews are the most effective method for interviewing participants, I used a series of planned questions based around my research questions in order to ensure that I covered the most salient points but deviated from the questions where needed in order to explore aspects raised by the participants, therefore my data collection method can be classed as semi-structured interviews for both the primary group of participants and the focus group. The interview questions were based around my key lines of enquiry, which came from my research questions. These are elements of data that bring meaning to the research question. For example, for the research question of ‘is leadership ‘shared’ between the sponsor and the headteacher?’ the findings are set-out within the key lines of enquiry of:

- Headteacher perceptions on their autonomy
- Sponsors’ influence over pupil selection to examine if leadership is shared
- Headteacher autonomy over curricula and assessment to understand if leadership is shared
- Post titles for school leaders as an indicator of whether leadership is shared



The first draft of my research questions was discussed with my main supervisor and revised following feedback. I piloted the questions with two headteachers prior to commencing my fieldwork in order to ensure the questions allowed me to gain the perceptions of relationships between headteachers and sponsors. Following these pilots, I revised the questions and produced a finalised list of semi-structured questions as part of my interview schedule (see appendix B).

### **3.6 Sampling method**

Miles and Huberman (1994) state the rationale for sampling in research:

‘Sampling is crucial for later analysis. As much as you might want to, you cannot study everyone everywhere doing everything. Your choices – whom you look at or talk with, where, when, about what, and why – all place limits on the conclusions you can draw...’ (p27)

Punch (2009) states that the researcher needs to address three questions in their sampling strategy: how will it be chosen, and why; how big will the sample be, and why; and what claims will be made for the sample’s representativeness. These key questions will now be addressed.

#### **How the sample was chosen, and why**

In any study there will be a ‘population’ that the researcher needs to examine – in the case of my research this was primary school headteachers who were employed by sponsors in England (although some of the school leaders were referred to as principals or ‘heads of school’ by their trusts (and these titles emerged as significant and will be discussed in the

findings), in this research all are referred to as headteacher unless it is necessary to title them otherwise). Therefore, this would give a population of several thousand potential participants for my research, which is beyond the scope of this study. As a result, there was a need to sample the population. The researcher has two approaches to sampling available to them, random or non-probability; in my fieldwork a 'random' selection of the population of primary sponsored headteachers would not elicit the knowledge of the relationships between sponsored primary headteachers and the different types of sponsors that was required. Perhaps the two most widely used forms of non-probability sampling techniques are purposive and convenience, which were both utilised in the fieldwork for this thesis. A purposive sample:

'...allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested. However, this does not provide a simple approval to any case we happen to choose. Rather, purposive sampling demands that we think critically about the parameters of the population we are studying and choose our sample case carefully on this basis.'

(Silverman, 2013, p148)

Therefore, purposive sampling was used in my fieldwork to ensure that I elicited the responses of a range of headteachers who were employed within different types of sponsored academy trusts, whereas as a random sample might have produced an unrepresentative sample. This was to examine if sponsored primary headteachers experienced the phenomenon in a universal manner or if there were contrasts compared to the sponsor type (these differing sponsor types are discussed in more detail in the sample representation section). In addition to purposive sampling there was also a small element of snowball sampling used for the fieldwork, which involves the researcher identifying:

‘one or more individuals from the population of interest. After they have been interviewed, they are used as informants to identify other members of the population, who are themselves used as informants, and so on.’

(Robson,2002, p275)

Snowball sampling can ensure diversity in the participants as it allows the researcher to access those that might hold differing opinions. As can be seen in table 3.2, two of the headteachers in the primary phase of the data collection can be described as being identified through the snowball approach – these were both recommendations of the headteacher of Swan Academy. As will be shown in chapter 4, this headteacher can be classed as an ‘outlier’, as his comments were not necessarily reflective of the majority of participants – I asked him if he could put me in touch with any other headteachers who might have *differing opinions* about being sponsored to him. It was important for me to gain contrasting opinions through the snowball sample, as a criticism of snowball sampling is that respondents can suggest other participants with similar opinions which would not have helped to gain a spread of opinions from sponsored headteachers. Although I have classed these two headteachers as being identified through ‘snowball’, they could equally be described as being part of ‘maximum variation sampling’ which is a form of purposive sampling where the aim of the sample is to gain heterogeneity (diversity of sample).

Accessing all the participants required through purposive and snowball sampling techniques proved problematic. Initially, I endeavoured to contact participants not known to me and not identified to me through colleagues; this was via letters through the post or email contacts – around thirty headteachers were contacted in this way but this only generated one participant (the headteacher of St Hilda’s Academy). This identifies how

difficult it can be to undertake research with headteachers, even when the researcher is 'one of their own'. Therefore, I had to employ convenience sampling to increase my sample, which Robson (2002) describes as:

'...choosing the nearest and most convenient persons to act as respondents. The process is continued until the required sample size has been reached.' (p265)

Robson (2002) has reservations concerning this sampling approach, describing it as 'cheap and dirty' (p265) but he does acknowledge that this is the most widely used sampling method. The convenience sampling involved me approaching potential participants either directly because they were known to me professionally (through professional networks I had been a member of in different LA areas) or as a result of being given their details through colleagues – therefore what was experienced might be classed as a convenience-snowball hybrid. As I was located in the Midlands, and this was where my professional career has been based, the headteachers identified were also within this area, although participants were spread across three shire counties and two unitary authorities. Whilst a number of participants were identified via colleagues, using convenience sampling, there was often a 'purposive' element to my requests, therefore I did select primary headteachers working for certain types of sponsor in order to ensure I had a similar representation in my sample to the national picture of sponsor types. Table 3.2 sets-out the participants in my research and how they were identified and the form of sampling.

Pseudonym	Identified to be part of research via	Sampling approach
Acres	Participant was known to the researcher through local networking	Convenience
Dove	Participant identified through a colleague	Purposive – example of a national chain academy
Forest	Participant was known to the researcher through local networking	Convenience but also purposive – example of a very small MAT academy
Local	Participant identified through a colleague	Snowball – recommendation from the headteacher of Swan Academy
Midlands	Participant identified through a colleague	Convenience
National	Participant identified through a colleague	Purposive – example of a national chain academy
St Denis	Participant identified through a colleague	Purposive – example of an academy in a diocesan sponsored umbrella trust
St Hilda's	Participant was the only one of 30 headteachers unknown to the researcher contacted by post / email who responded to my direct contact	Purposive – example of an academy in a diocesan multi-academy trust
St Mary's	Participant identified through a colleague	Snowball – recommendation from the headteacher of Swan Academy
Swan	Participant was known to the researcher through local networking	Convenience
University	Participant was known to the researcher through local networking	Convenience but also purposive as the academy was an example of being sponsored by a university

**Table 3.2 Sampling techniques used to select participants for the fieldwork**

The secondary phase of the fieldwork utilised a focus group. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) state that focus groups are:

‘contrived settings, bringing together a specifically chosen sector of the population to discuss a particular given theme or topic, where the interaction with the group leads to data and outcomes. Their contrived nature is both their strength and their weakness...’ (p288)

Although focus groups involve interviews, they are different in that there is not the ‘back and forth’ interaction between the interviewer and interviewee, instead the group interacts with one another to discuss the given topic (Denscombe, 2010), in the case of my research, sponsored primary headteacher experiences within multi-academy trusts. The focus group was a collective of five different serving primary academy headteachers to those in my primary phase of data collection, three of whom were from within the multi-academy trust that I was CEO, the other two were from small, local multi-academy trusts.

Convenience sampling was used for the focus group as it was felt unnecessary for a representative group of academy headteachers, as the main aim of the focus group was for them to collectively consider my initial findings and examine if these resonated with their understanding of the phenomenon. These headteachers within the focus group were recruited by me sending out an email to all headteachers within my own MAT and asking them if they were willing to participate or if they had colleagues that would be willing to take part from other MATs. The focus group had the advantage of the participants being able to discuss and refine collectively their thinking following the input of others. Participants were asked to reflect on my initial findings and offer challenge to my thinking. I also used the focus group to examine my initial conceptual framework to ensure that the wording I was using, and the themes being developed correlated to the evidence that I had presented to them.

### **Size of the sample, and why**

There was not a predetermined number of participants outlined at the start of the fieldwork period for the primary phase of the data collection. In my fieldwork it was clear that in the latter stages of data collection there was very little new evidence emerging about the type of relationships headteachers had with their sponsors. I therefore decided to reassess my fieldwork before proceeding further. This involved reviewing all my data using the codes generated within the study and testing to see if new codes were emerging from interviews conducted in the latter stages. This was not the case and the data from at least the final four interviews did not contribute to the generation of any new codes for data analysis. Towards the end of my fieldwork the research of Greany (2018) was also

released, whose findings resonated with my initial conclusions and also research into MATs from Ofsted (2019), albeit 'grey literature', as it is a government publication, it also gave me reassurance that I had probably reached the point where continuing with the fieldwork was unlikely to generate significantly different reflections. The utilisation of a focus group also allowed me to examine if I had reached such a point with my research as I wanted the group to explore if there were likely to be any different opinions proffered by headteachers to those already given in the study; the group did not identify differing experiences from those identified in the research. This triangulation of phase 1 and 2 participants, the assessment of my initial research findings against similar studies and the application of an approach supported by the principles of saturation theory (Saunders *et al.* 2017) gave me confidence that the sample size was appropriate for the study. I do not claim a total fidelity to all the principles of saturation theory, but rather applied its broad principles to help me make an informed decision about when to cease further data collection.

### **Sample representation**

As the research focuses on only one group of eleven headteachers, the findings will not be used to make claims about the wider group of all primary academy sponsored headteachers, in line with Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000). Despite this, the headteachers chosen for the research reflect a cross spectrum of the different types of sponsorship arrangement across England headteacher belong to. The selection therefore included a university sponsor, schools, national chains, dioceses and philanthropic sponsors (referred to by the DFE as 'charity sector sponsors'). Three headteachers were also chosen because they had selected to join a sponsored trust despite their academies

being classed as *converter academies* by the DFE and therefore not being required to join a sponsor (St Mary’s, Local and University academies). Three of the headteachers interviewed led schools that were sponsored by the Church of England through their individual dioceses (three dioceses were represented in this sample) – this proportionately high number mirrors the fact that the Church of England is the largest sponsor of academies in the country, albeit not via one central sponsor but through individual dioceses. Five schools were led by sponsors who started from a single good / outstanding converter academy – nationally this is the largest group of sponsor arrangements and within the sample in this study it makes up the largest group (see table 3.3):

Type of trust	Schools represented in the sample
Faith based sponsors	St Denis Academy St Mary’s Academy St Hilda’s Academy National Academy
National ‘chains’	Acres Academy National Academy Dove Academy
Philanthropic	Dove Academy
University led	University Academy
School-led	Swan Academy Midlands Academy Forest Academy Local Academy Acres Academy
Church of England, diocesan sponsored	St Denis Academy St Mary’s Academy St Hilda’s Academy

Note: Some academies appear in more than one category.

**Table 3.3 Sample representation of sponsorship arrangements in the fieldwork**

As can be seen in table 3.3, some academies in my study have been categorised into more than one group; for example, National Academy is an example of an academy run by a national chain, which is also a faith driven organisation. It should be remembered, as identified in the literature review, that any attempt to categorise schools is now complex (Woods and Simkins, 2014).



## School characteristics

Tables 3.4 and 3.5 provide the reader with additional contextual information regarding the participants' schools as Punch (2009) states that cases should be 'thickly described' in order that the reader can decide if the evidence is generalisable. In addition, table 3.6 outlines details of the participants who participated in the focus group.

Pseudonym	School Ofsted category on transfer into MAT	Ofsted grade at time of the interview	Number of schools in the MAT*	Make-up of the MAT	Primary type of sponsorship	Secondary type of sponsorship	Sponsored or 'converter' status
Acres	Special Measures	Good	> 40 Very large	Primary	National chain	Successful school led	Sponsored
Dove	RI	RI	>20 <30 Large	Primary	National chain	Philanthropic	Sponsored
Forest	Special Measures	RI	<10 Small	Primary and secondary	Successful school led	N/A	Sponsored
Local	RI	RI	>10 <20 Medium	Primary	Successful school led	N/A	Converter sponsored
Midlands	Special Measures	Good	<10 <20 Medium	Primary and secondary	Successful school led	N/A	Sponsored
National	RI	Good	>40 Very large	Primary and secondary	National chain	Faith based	Sponsored
St Denis	Special Measures	RI	<10 Small	Primary	Faith based	N/A	Sponsored
St Hilda's	RI	RI	>10 <20 Medium	Primary and secondary	Faith based	Church of England	Sponsored
St Mary's	Good	Good	>10 <20 Medium	Primary	Faith based	Church of England	Converter
Swan	Special Measures	Good	>10 <20 Medium	Primary and secondary	Successful school led	N/A	Sponsored
University	Satisfactory	Good	>10 <20 Medium	Primary and secondary	University led	N/A	Converter

\*At the time of the interviews – the categorisation of small, medium, large or very large is my own for use in chapter 5  
RI = Ofsted category of Requires Improvement

**Table: 3.4 School characteristics**

In table 3.4 the number of schools within each trust has been made opaque in order that the different trusts are not easily identifiable. For this thesis I have classed a trust as 'small' if it had between 1 and 10 schools; 'medium' 11 to 20 schools; 'large' as 21 to 30 schools

and ‘very large’ as being above 30 schools. These classifications differ to those proposed by Greany (2018) given that his ‘small’ category (3-6 schools) would not cover two schools within my study, as one was a stand-alone sponsored academy and the other school was in a two school MAT. In addition, his ‘large’ category (15+ schools) will include sponsors with very different dynamics; in his model for example my own trust, with 17 schools, would be grouped with the large national trusts such as Ark, E-Act and Reach2, some of whom have in excess of fifty schools in their trusts.

School	Length of time with the sponsor	Year sponsored
Acres	3 years and 0 months	2013
Dove	3 years and 4 months	2013
Local	2 months	2017
Forest	4 years 1 month	2013
Midlands	2 years 2 months	2014
National	4 years and 11 months	2013
St Denis	3 years 5 months	2013
St Hilda’s	1 year 6 months	2015
St Mary’s	6 months	2016
Swan	1 year 3 months	2015
University	4 years and 3 months	2013

**Table 3.5 Length of time each school had been sponsored at the time of the interviews**

### Focus group characteristics

Participant	Length of time as a headteacher	Current school type
A	7 years	Sponsored academy
B	7 years	Converter academy within a small MAT without sponsor status
C	1 year	Sponsored academy
D	2 years	Converter academy within a small MAT with sponsor status
E	6 years	Sponsored academy

**Table 3.6 Characteristics of the headteachers in the focus group**

### 3.7 Data analysis

How a researcher analyses their data is of importance not only to the integrity of the research but also to how it is interpreted by the wider profession, and non-professional communities. The methods I used in the data analysis stage needed to be systematic, disciplined and transparent in order that the reader understands how the conclusions were reached (Punch, 2009). Creswell (2014) states that the phenomenological researcher needs to undertake data analysis through using significant statements from participants, and the development of meaning units, and the development of 'essence description'. But Groenewald (2004) cites Hycner (1999) in outlining that the term 'data analysis' can be seen as having 'dangerous connotations' (p17) for the phenomenological researcher as it implies an element of breaking-up of data whereas phenomenology concerns seeing the phenomenon as a whole. Therefore, Groenewald (2004) refers to this phase of the research design as the 'explicitation of the data' (p17); explicitation involves the process of 'making clear' the meaning of the text in order to make the implicit explicit. Groenewald (2004) identifies five stages in the explicitation of data in order to ensure its integrity, in line with Hycner (1999):

- phenomenological reduction i.e. bracketing / epoche
- delineating units of meaning
- clustering of units of meaning in order to develop themes
- summarising each interview, validating it and if necessary, modifying the summary
- extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and constructing a

composite summary

Given that my research questions position my study in phenomenology, I aligned my data analysis to that of Groenewald (2004) as outlined below:

**Phenomenological reduction i.e. bracketing / epoche:** I spent considerable time at the beginning of the research discussing my own opinions regarding sponsored academisation and potential relationships with my main supervisor and colleagues in order that I was conscious of any existing preconceptions that I may have had; I then aimed to set these aside through bracketing in order that I listened carefully to each headteacher's responses. I ensured that the participants were given an opportunity to examine and reflect on the transcriptions in case my questioning led them to make incorrect statements. I also attempted to bracket any assumptions and biases that the participants may have brought into the interviews that were not substantiated by the evidence that they presented.

**Delineating units of meaning:** Once the interviews had been transcribed and anonymised, the transcripts were emailed to the participants who were asked to check for inaccuracies and to ensure that they felt the anonymisation prevented their identification, their school or their sponsor. Once the participants had approved the transcripts, I delineated the meaning of the participants by describing accurately their accounts. In order to do this systematically I undertook coding of my interviews. Saldana (2016) states:

'A code in qualitative research is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data.' (p4)

Codes were developed once the participant's interview was transcribed; codes were assigned units of meaning to the descriptive information compiled in the field work. As subsequent transcriptions were completed these were also coded and where required further coding evolved. On occasions text was recoded, for example in some transcriptions headteachers referred to 'values' or 'vision' for their school, in most instances the terms were being used interchangeably and therefore all of these were coded as 'vision'. If further coding evolved, previous transcriptions were revisited to decide if to code additional meaning in these transcriptions or to amend a previously ascribed code. In order to code the transcriptions in a methodical manner I used a commercially available software package (ATLAS). The codes I used included:

- retention of uniqueness
- conflict with sponsor
- contextual information (three codes; one for the school, one for the sponsor and one regarding the headteacher)
- control exerted by the sponsor
- headteacher's ability to influence the development of the MAT
- headteacher's reflections on their leadership

In fig 3.1 I have included a section of data from one interview, the headteacher of Dove Academy to illustrate the coding process.

**Interviewer:** You touched on vision and values, what about your own vision and values? Have you been able to put those in place in your school?

**Interviewee:** Yes, I feel so. With this school, there is a lot of needing to play the game at the moment, whereas given ultimate time I would take a bit of a different approach than the one I'm taking. I would make it more values based if you like. I would knit the curriculum far closer together, but I don't have the time to get the results up. The results need to come up more quickly.

vision

curriculum

attainment

**Interviewer:** What is it that is stopping you implementing your vision?

Impact of government policy

**Interviewee:** I think it's government policy because I know when they [the sponsor] have things like meetings with the DFE, the first school the DFE wants to discuss is us because of the historic low results. I think if they see the results come up then it bides us that bit more time if you like, to get it, to embed things properly. Now you look at our school improvement plan of the moment and you think well, if I take what we're doing this term, that would normally be what you would do in a year but it's that pace that needs to be.

attainment

Impact of sponsor

**Interviewer:** That 'pace', is that coming from you or is it coming from the sponsor?

Impact of sponsor

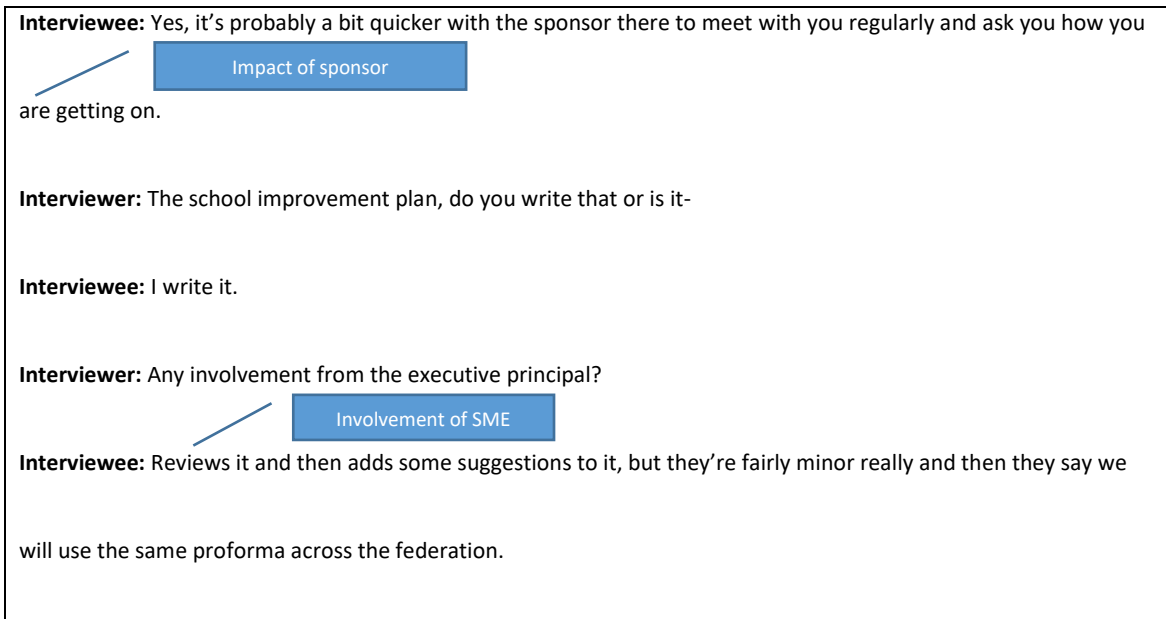
**Interviewee:** It's coming from the sponsor.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel some, I'm not saying 'pressure' is the right word, but do you feel that you have got to go at a certain pace?

Impact of sponsor

**Interviewee:** Yes. There is a pressure from the sponsor to go at that pace. If the sponsor wasn't there to give that pace, I would know that that pace needed to be there anyway.

**Interviewer:** Meaning, you'd probably be going at that pace yourself anyway?



**Fig. 3.1 Example of coding from a participant's transcription**

**Clustering of units of meaning in order to develop themes:** This coding resulted in a fairly extensive initial list; data was sifted regularly but care was taken not to draw early conclusions. The process of data reduction then began to form a manageable number of units for analysis of data. The software allowed me to cluster all of the data regarding one code together, allowing me to identify similar phrases, patterns, themes and relationships. Fig 3.2 identifies how this process occurred; ATLAS grouped all of the quotes attributed to the code 'vision' and allowed me to consider these against one another (in fig 3.2 I have omitted the text of the quotes and just left in the transcription code in order that the reader can see the process undertaken without pages of text).

## **Vision**

16 Quotations:

- (19240:20502) - D 1: Acres MAT
- (20504:21210) - D 1: Acres MAT
- (36031:36662) - D 3: St Hilda's
- (13423:14256) - D 4: St Denis
- (33507:34715) - D 5: Dove MAT
- (42605:43046) - D 5: Dove MAT
- (11197:11278) - D 6: Local MAT
- (13962:14982) - D 7: Midlands County MAT
- (19927:20411) - D 7: Midlands County MAT
- (5868:7535) - D 8: National MAT
- (22231:24116) - D 8: National MAT
- (16749:17746) - D 9: Swan MAT
- (18350:19126) - D 9: Swan MAT
- (15046:15714) - D 10: Forest MAT
- (11478:12094) - D 11: University MAT
- (23422:23872) - D 12: St Mary's

**Fig.3.2 Collating evidence through ATLAS related to one specific code: 'vision'**

**Summarising each interview, validating it and if necessary modifying the summary:** Each of the interviews was summarised (an example of three summaries can be located in appendix A) in order to best represent the relationships that the headteachers had with their sponsors; this was later used to create continuums for accountability and autonomy in order to differentiate between the different experiences within the trusts in my study. The inclusion of sample summaries in the appendices allows the reader to analyse if they would have reached the same or similar conclusions as I did regarding the levels of accountability and autonomy experienced by these headteachers. Examples of summaries



of the accountability experienced by three of the headteachers are outlined below in table

3.7:

Accountability – Half-termly ‘challenge advisor’ visits undertake observations and scrutinise data. Headteacher appraisal undertaken by three governors and the ‘challenge’ advisor. Pupil data is submitted to the sponsor six times per year. ‘Scrutiny’ by the sponsor had ‘improved’ as a result of a dip in pupil performance the previous year.

**University Academy headteacher**

Accountability - Performance management targets focus heavily on compliance and there can be up to 16 targets set; only the CEO was involved with the headteacher’s PM review, which the headteacher did not agree with. Headteachers in the MAT are asked to present and justify their school’s achievement data in front of the other headteachers. The sponsor undertakes regular ‘mocksteds’ to evaluate its schools.

**Swan Academy headteacher**

Accountability – The headteacher stated she was previously answerable to the ‘executive headteacher’ and ‘regional director’ but was now only answerable to governors and the ‘regional director’. The headteacher described her relationship with the sponsor as ‘good’ and ‘supportive’ but clarified that ‘she wouldn’t cross them’. The headteacher’s performance is appraised by the regional director with the chair of governors ‘sitting-in’. A termly review meeting is held with key members of the central team where progress towards targets are discussed and support allocated where required. There is a ‘regional board’ above the local academy board of governors.

**Acres Academy headteacher**

**Table: 3.7 Example of summaries of headteacher comments regarding accountability in their trusts**

The three example summaries of accountability given in table 3.7 show that all three headteachers are subject to accountability by their sponsors. Yet, there is difference between the three. As a result, I judged that in these three examples the headteacher of University Academy had the least internal accountability from his sponsors of the three, with the headteacher of Swan Academy having the most. This process was repeated for all transcripts in order to determine the relative positions on the continuum for

accountability.

**Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and constructing a composite summary:** Once the coding and individual summaries were completed, I was able to construct a composite summary of the interviews which became the basis of the formulation of chapter 4.

### **3.8 Data display**

Punch (2009) cites the work of Miles and Huberman (1994) who stated that it is time to move away from the extended text model of displaying data and instead incorporate more matrices, graphs and charts. I align myself with the approach outlined by Miles and Huberman (2014) as cited in Punch (2009) as I feel that the use of such mechanisms in my thesis will allow the reader to gain a greater understanding of the findings, and make it more accessible, especially to busy professionals. These include heuristic devices in chapter 5. These heuristic devices are used to exemplify my conceptual frameworks and enhance comprehensibility. The use of matrices, graphs and charts is often associated with quantitative data; I do not feel that the use of these devices in my thesis contradicts the approach of qualitative research, as I contend their use merely relates to how this data is presented and not how it is interpreted.

The presentation of my data includes the conversion of some of the interview text into what may appear quantifiable data, for example, in chapter 5 I present elements of the

qualitative data regarding headteacher autonomy and accountability in the form of a matrix (fig.5.11). This matrix is a visual representation of this qualitative data and not a translation of the data into quantifiable measures. It is used to illustrate relationships rather than present an accurate, calculable, representation. The placement of the headteachers on this matrix has been completed through my interpretation of the summaries of the interviews for both the headteacher reflections on their autonomy and accountability. A different researcher, or the reader may reach different conclusion from their interpretation of the interviews. In addition, in chapter 4 (table 4.1) I have synthesised the participants' answers regarding their sponsors' approaches to curriculum design and assessment into a table. Headteachers were asked a series of questions regarding both assessment and curriculum as part of the semi-structured interviews; I have interpreted this evidence to tabulate the findings in order that the reader can more easily access the findings. The interpretation of the findings in this way was supported by the coding process undertaken but it should be noted that the interpretation of the qualitative data in this way involved me making judgements and a different researcher may interpret the data in a contrary way.

### **3.9 Ethics**

As with all 'real world' research, it was vital that as researcher I considered ethical issues and followed prescribed guidelines in order to avoid causing harm and to ensure integrity of the research findings. Punch (2009) states that following a qualitative approach creates more 'acute' (p50) ethical issues as such studies involve, 'the most sensitive, intimate and

innermost matters in people's lives' (p50) as it involves collecting data from, and about people. In my research ethical issues were arguably not as 'acute' as they could have been if I had chosen to involve children in the fieldwork (Ball, 1985 cited in Homan, 2002), yet there were a number of issues that needed to be borne-in-mind when researching sponsorship of schools. One of the major considerations was that the headteachers may have been put *at risk* if they were seen to be negative towards their sponsor, for example through positioning themselves against some of the sponsor's policies. Information that they provided may also have portrayed their school and / or sponsor in a negative light, which could bring the school / sponsor into disrepute; in these times of neo-liberalistic policy in education, where sponsors might be competing to attract pupils and other schools to join the trust, bringing sponsors into disrepute could have financial implications for the organisation. Therefore, if interviewees brought their trust into disrepute they could ultimately lose their jobs or face other negative consequences. As a result, it was important that the participants, their schools and sponsors were not identifiable from my research and therefore pseudonyms were created for the headteachers, their schools and trusts and the locations where they worked were removed; in addition, other information that might identify the trusts, schools or participants were removed including the precise number of schools within each trust. In order to ensure confidentiality, all respondents had the opportunity to check through the anonymised transcription of their interview before they were utilised in the data analysis stage to check that nothing identified them, their school or sponsor.

Another ethical consideration that had to be explored was the use of participants in the focus group that were known to me, and in some instances, were employed within my own organisation; in addition, some of the participants were known to one another. Therefore, a consideration for this research was that participants might feel obliged to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, or they might not challenge my thinking. With the 'insider' participants it was made clear that there would be no implications for them critiquing our own MAT or being negative about any aspect of the research. I felt that the focus group was honest in their thoughts and certainly did not just 'hold a mirror' up to the researcher. As a consequence, some of my thinking was challenged, especially regarding the conceptual framework terminology I had initially used. There were no rewards for any of the participants, financial or otherwise. Throughout the process I ensured that participants known to me were treated like all other contributors to my research. I also used my supervisor to test out my questions to participants and to discuss the findings to ensure that there was sufficient exploration.

It was also imperative that focus group participants retained confidentiality amongst themselves, as Denscombe (2010) points out:

'Group members need to feel assured that if they express a personal feeling or reveal some aspect of their personal life during the discussion that such information will be treated as confidential by the group...This is important because, given the nature of focus group discussions, individuals can sometimes 'open up' about a private, embarrassing or sensitive aspect of their life – possibly getting swept along on the wave of empathy with other members, or even in a passionate attempt to argue against the point being made by someone else in the group.' (p357)

Although it could be argued that the research within my thesis would not touch on participants' 'personal life' as identified by Denscombe (2010), members of the group were being asked to share their personal thoughts on the professional world that they were associated with and therefore the need for confidentiality between participants had to be reinforced at the beginning of the interviews.

Consent was sought from the participants before the start of the process and each headteacher was given a brief on my research. Consent was on-going until the participant's data had been anonymised and they had agreed to the transcript with anonymisation. None of the headteachers informed me if they had spoken to their sponsors about the research or requested 'consent' from them to participate (it was not a requirement of my ethics approval that the headteachers received consent from their sponsor). All data was treated confidentially. The recordings and transcripts were kept in a secured cabinet in a locked room and all digital records were stored as per University of Nottingham regulations. Participants were informed that they had a right to leave the research at any point before the interviews were anonymised (a 6-week period). They were also told of the purpose of the research and offered a summary of the research once completed. The use of data followed the guidelines of the University of Nottingham and destruction / removal of data has been followed per these regulations. I requested approval for the fieldwork from the University of Nottingham's ethics committee (University of Nottingham, 2016) and received permission to proceed before interviewing any of the participants (the ethical approval paperwork is included in appendix C).

## **Chapter 4**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the evidence gained from my fieldwork in two sections. Firstly, the findings from the interviews with the headteachers of eleven different academies are set out. For each of the research questions I developed key lines of enquiry to draw-out the main findings, as set out in the methodology chapter. Through the analysis and coding of the interviews, key themes were identified which were related back to the research questions and literature review to aid the structuring of this chapter. The responses from the headteachers are set out around these key research questions. Secondly, the data from the secondary phase of data collection, involving the focus group is presented. The focus group fieldwork involved presenting the findings from the interviews with the eleven headteachers to a group of academy headteachers to explore if the experiences of my sample resonated with them; this allowed the development of further 'rich data' and tested out my emerging conceptual frameworks. A short conclusion ends this chapter, as major discussion regarding the evidence in this chapter is expanded upon in chapter 5.

#### **4.2.1 Is leadership 'shared' between the sponsor and the headteacher?**

The participant headteachers were asked a series of questions to gain an insight into who has the agency to lead in the sample sponsored academies, the sponsor or the headteacher in order to ascertain if leadership is shared between them, or resides with just one of them. This is an important line of enquiry given that the government stated that leaders in academies would have more autonomy than those in the maintained sector at the

inception of the academy programme (Department for Education, 2010). The lines of enquiry regarding this research question included:

- asking headteachers to reflect specifically on their autonomy;
- examining the autonomy headteachers have over their school's admissions, exclusions, curriculum and assessment systems;
- the title which the sponsor uses to describe the role of the lead professional in a school, as this may give an indication of leadership hierarchies and the distribution of leadership.

Headteachers were also asked to consider their autonomy to set the vision and values for their school; this will be considered in section 4.2.2 and will be linked back to how it also relates to the sharing of leadership between the sponsor and headteachers.

#### Line of enquiry: Headteacher perceptions of their autonomy

The majority of headteachers interviewed in my fieldwork articulated their belief that despite being sponsored they had autonomy to run the school as they wished and retain the school's unique character; on *face-value* therefore it appeared that the majority of school leaders did not feel leadership was shared with the sponsor. As the interviews progressed it was often clear that the majority of the headteachers did not actually have the level of autonomy that they initially articulated and therefore leadership *was* being shared with the sponsor. This was exemplified by the headteacher of **Acres Academy** who felt that she had autonomy and stated:

‘We’ve been quite lucky. [**Acres Academy MAT**] are very much about keeping the identity of individual schools.’

(Headteacher of Acres Academy)

Despite this assertion, she then went on to state that ‘initially’ there were certain ‘directives’ that she had to follow and stated that it was a ‘non-negotiable’ on joining the



sponsor that they had to implement one consistent assessment system across the group of schools. She also said that the trust often 'suggests' things to leaders for them to implement, which headteachers are 'answerable' to the trust if they do not adopt. With regards to the curriculum, the trust had 'suggested' a commercially produced curriculum for them to follow as it had been successful in some of their other schools, and also a scheme to teach phonics (the teaching of early reading skills, using letter sounds and blends), which the headteacher stated, 'we weren't told we had to [use the scheme], but there's just that air of "that's fine if you don't, be answerable if your phonics results don't increase."' The headteacher went on to state that headteachers in the trust can put in place any initiatives they want, 'as long as it is having a positive impact on children's learning, then there's freedom to do whatever.'

The approach being adopted by this sponsor was similar to that within the trust that **St Hilda's Academy** belonged to. The headteacher stated that she was able to introduce new initiatives and gave the example of recently buying-in an external trainer to lead staff in 'assertive mentoring'; the sponsor appointed school advisor had stated, 'oh, that's expensive. I want to see the impact.' The approach being taken by these two sponsors appears to be to give the impression that the headteachers have autonomy, but then to question leaders' decisions and threaten headteachers that they will be held to account if they make the wrong decision; these headteachers are allowed to make decisions, but it appears that they are not allowed to fail. Such an approach by a sponsor could lead to headteachers feeling that there is no professional room for them to take risks, yet of course, all risk needs the capacity to fail. As a result, this may leave headteachers in a

position where they feel unable to experiment and innovate, which are key elements linked to the efficacy of autonomy (OECD, 2011). The account of both these headteachers also gives an insight into power dynamics at play; it will potentially take strong and experienced headteachers to go against the *suggestions* of their sponsors.

Thomson (2010) hypothesised that headteachers were pressing for autonomy in order to 'maintain' or 'advance' their relative positions in the 'field'. Evidence from the headteachers in my research points to headteachers not necessarily 'pressing' for autonomy in all aspects of their role, as in fact they are happy to relinquish some of their autonomy and therefore *share* leadership with their sponsor. The headteacher of **St Mary's Academy** when asked if she felt she had autonomy since becoming an 'academy' headteacher stated:

'Where I want it, yes, where I'm not bothered about it, like who sorts out the buildings and who puts the bid in for the [new] kitchen, I'm very happy to pass on that responsibility elsewhere because it's not my area of interest, let alone strength.' (Headteacher of St Mary's Academy)

The headteacher of **National Academy** had previously been the headteacher of a stand-alone sponsored academy and he felt that his current sponsor allowed him to focus on teaching and learning more than his previous sponsor as he didn't have to be so heavily involved in property matters; he felt this was an advantaged of a large trust, as the trust was able to put in place the infrastructure to support its schools. This does lead to a reflection about what headteachers actually want power and autonomy over. Since the introduction of LMS, post 1988, headteachers have had to take on more and more responsibility for aspects that their teacher training didn't prepare them for, for example

building maintenance and procurement. This has taken headteachers away from their traditional core duties regarding teaching and learning and therefore larger sponsors may be able to take on much of these responsibilities thus allowing headteachers to refocus on teaching and learning. Although, on the converse it may lead to some academy headteachers feeling deskilled if they transferred to work in a LA maintained school where those skills were required.

Whilst the above headteachers saw some advantages of losing aspects of their autonomy, other headteachers could identify negative aspects to losing total control and having to share leadership with the sponsor. The sponsor of **Local Academy** had introduced a 'staff forum' for staff to raise concerns with them and the staff had stated that there was an issue with 'communication' within the school. The headteacher stated:

'We [had] just renegotiated [a] phone contract [prior to academisation], and we've made a saving. It was decided [by the sponsor] that we put a phone in every classroom. Well, that's just increased our phone bill by over £1,000. I'm thinking, "we can't afford that". I'm going to get back tonight and talk to [the CEO] and say, "do you realise this lovely idea, it's got impact, 1,000 quid per annum. Are you happy with that?" I don't think I would have done it.' (Headteacher of Local Academy)

The final comment is very illuminating – 'I don't think I would have done it,' as earlier in the interview the headteacher had stated that he felt as though he was still in control of the school. Despite the headteacher's assertions, he clearly doesn't have the ultimate power in his school. The headteacher of the **Local Academy** went on to state that the level of autonomy a school was delegated by the sponsor depended on individual circumstances, rather than a consistent approach across the MAT. This is exemplified by

the fact that the headteacher stated negative pupil behaviour was not a major issue in his school but the headteacher wanted to introduce a new behaviour reward scheme; he was told that as behaviour was not a concern he was free to implement his own scheme, but if there had been an issue the sponsor would have dictated the scheme he could use, which would have been 'tried and tested' in some of its other schools. This gives the impression that the sponsor doesn't always allow its headteachers to put in place initiatives that school leaders develop – instead they can be given an *off-the-shelf* package, this doesn't necessarily allow for contextualisation, despite the findings of Leithwood and Menzies (1998) and OECD (2011) stating that contextualisation of policy is linked to improved pupil achievement. What some sponsors are therefore exhibiting is an adoption of *earned autonomy* where headteachers of more successful schools are allowed to implement their own ideas whilst those headteachers in more challenging circumstances are directed by the sponsor, which concurs with the findings of Greany (2018) . As a result, headteacher agency in sponsored academies may be linked to the school's context.

Again, the headteacher of **Midlands Academy** felt that the sponsor was allowing him to retain his autonomy but added:

'whilst sharing good practice and sharing resources...but there are elements...where we do the Midlands Academy MAT 'way' because we know it's outstanding practice.' (Headteacher of Midlands Academy)

Further into the interview it became apparent that the Midlands Academy MAT 'way' covered quite extensive areas of school leadership. What is clear from the interview with the headteacher of **Midlands Academy** is that his initial contention that he was able to

retain his autonomy was actually not the reality when triangulated with evidence from the rest of his interview, in fact leadership was shared with the sponsor, although to a higher degree than many of the other schools in the fieldwork.

A similar contradiction occurred when interviewing the headteacher of the **National Academy**. When asked to reflect on the role the sponsor has in determining the school's curriculum he stated, 'not much of it, no' but then went on to specify that the sponsor had put in place a maths scheme across all of its schools. When asked to reflect on his autonomy regarding them imposing this he stated:

'it's fine - maths is maths isn't it? You see, they're not dictatorial people to work for at all. It's very much you can, or you can't...and I like that.'

(Headteacher of National Academy)

When the headteacher of the **National Academy** was asked about his autonomy to put in place his own assessment system he stated that he had been allowed to implement his own system; he thought that it was 'bizarre' that he had the ability to do this as his expectation on joining the sponsor was that they would impose a system on the school. The headteacher then went on to state that the sponsor expects all pupils to be assessed termly using nationally produced literacy and numeracy standardised assessments. Clearly the sponsor *was* imposing an assessment system on all its schools. The contradiction here may be a confusion between assessment systems and tracking systems as it appears the headteacher purchased his own tracking system. As with the headteacher of **Midlands Academy**, it is difficult to reconcile this headteacher's comments on the sponsor; on the one-hand he states that they are not 'dictatorial' but then goes on to comment on the

decisions that he cannot make. The examples given by a number of headteachers go to the heart of the debate regarding autonomy versus standardisation. In reality if headteachers join a sponsored MAT they are opening themselves up to having aspects of their authority removed, although these may be areas that the headteacher wishes to relinquish (as exemplified by the headteachers of **St Mary's** and **National** academies), the sponsor also has the power to remove / reduce autonomy across a range of leadership functions, including teaching and learning at any point in the relationship.

The headteacher of the **Swan Academy** was more negative about his level of autonomy than any other headteacher in my study; he certainly felt that his autonomy was being eroded, especially regarding his ability to control the finances of the school – he wasn't even aware of the income allocated to his school by the DFE, as he was only told how much he could spend on different aspects. He stated that even to order a set of pencils he would require third authorisation from the central team. The headteacher also felt that aspects of school improvement were being 'restricted' and it was made clear to him that he had to implement the sponsor's assessment system or else the next time they 'judged' his school it would be deemed 'unsatisfactory or not appropriate'.

The **University Academy** headteacher stated that he was 'supported to have autonomy within teaching and learning.' On exploring this with the headteacher he elaborated and stated that he had previously had a less than effective school improvement advisor but that the new one was helping him to develop the teaching and learning in the school:

'[I now have] less autonomy than I did, but I feel better supported in the autonomy that I do have, but around teaching and learning it is very much the school sets its direction, the school seeks out the support it needs but has good challenge from its challenge advisor.'

(Headteacher of University Academy)

Similarly, the headteacher of **Swan Academy** also found that his autonomy had changed because of the growth of his MAT:

'Where before they would say, "we'll give you autonomy with decisions," they are [now] bringing them in in quiet archaic (*sic*) ways, really, and just trying to make people comply to certain systems to protect their own positions...I think compliance is becoming more of an issue with them in that they want you to comply more to a one-size-fits-all model...I think this has come about really because of their concern of the within MAT inspections [Ofsted 'focussed' inspections].'

(Headteacher of Swan Academy)

The headteacher of **Swan Academy** therefore assumes that his reduction in autonomy is a result of the MAT wanting to have control over what is happening across the schools in case they are inspected. These changes over time articulated by the participants resonate with the findings of Hill *et al.* (2012) who found that the level of influence and control exerted by the sponsor was not static but changed. Gibson (2015) had hypothesised that the relationship between headteachers and sponsors might change as the *academy* becomes established – from the empirical evidence in my thesis from the headteachers of **University Academy** and **Swan Academy**, it appears that the relationship might change as the *sponsor* becomes more established, rather than the *academy*; in these examples, the sharing of leadership between the sponsor and headteacher has moved to more control being exerted by the sponsor.

Three of the headteachers referred to their lack of power over school finances (**University Academy, National Academy and Swan Academy**), which concurs with the findings of West and Wolfe (2018). The reflections of these headteachers highlights a misconception that headteachers of sponsored academies may have regarding budgets and their relationship with the sponsor and the DFE, as in fact the funding agreement with the DFE is with the sponsor and not the individual school and the sponsor can therefore decide how to allocate funds; any potential *savings* that a school makes are in fact surpluses for the trust as a whole and not individual schools. The accountability for spending ultimately remains with the sponsor (through the accounting officer post), hence the levels of control that are sometimes implemented by MATs. Therefore, despite the reforms implemented from the 1980s onwards to give headteachers control over their budgets (Levacic, 2008), some headteachers in sponsored academies may be able to empathise with the headteacher in Thomson (2010) harking back to education in the 1970s and 1980s when he needed to telephone numerous clerks to buy a stamp, albeit now ICT systems make the process of granting authorisation easier.

Having specifically reflected on their autonomy, I triangulated the headteacher responses regarding their autonomy to examine if leadership is shared. They were therefore asked to articulate their autonomy over a number of specific key aspects, namely, pupil selection (admissions and exclusions), curriculum design and assessment procedures.



Line of enquiry: The influence of sponsors over pupil selection to determine if leadership is shared

Academy headteachers and sponsors have power over pupil selection through two mechanisms: admissions and exclusions. Nine of the eleven headteachers interviewed for this research stated that the sponsor had no impact on the admissions arrangements of their school. In their responses, headteachers focused on the processes of applying for school places and the appeals procedures, with most stating that they still follow the LA 'policy'. Such statements from the headteachers may point to their lack of understanding of the admissions body within an academy trust; in most cases within local authority schools the LA is the admission body, whereas, within MATs it is the MAT board and not individual governing bodies and headteachers. If therefore headteachers perceive that there is no difference it is because the MAT board has elected to administer admissions using the same criteria and processes as the LA, but they can change these at any point and headteachers didn't seem aware of this. It therefore appears that the majority of headteachers in the study have autonomy currently *delegated* to them to admit pupils as they had previously before they joined the sponsor. In my study there were only two examples of a sponsor altering or planning to alter the inherited admission arrangements. This was at **St Hilda's Academy** where siblings had been given greater priority in the admission criteria and at **Dove Academy** where the trust was proposing to give preferential status to the children of staff. Greany and Higham (2018) opine that the 'self-improving school-led system', of which academisation is seen as a part of, has led to school leaders being more selective regarding the pupils they admit, this was not evident in my study through admissions criteria. It may be that my results do not align with Greany and Higham

(2018) as my focus is on primary schools, whereas admission issues are often more acute in secondary schools due to increased marketisation in that sector.

There is some evidence that academies exclude more pupils than LA maintained schools (Machin and Sandi, 2018) and therefore it was important to assess if the sponsors in this study had the relationship with their headteachers that allowed the headteachers to make the decision about exclusions. In fact, none of the sponsors in the fieldwork were having a direct impact on the headteacher's ability to make independent decisions regarding exclusions. Although this was the case, two headteachers (**Acres Academy** and **Midlands Academy**) felt it was important to *discuss* any exclusions with Senior Management Executives (SMEs) at the trust, which may suggest more *subtle* measures by the sponsor to influence headteacher decisions. The headteacher of **Acres Academy** stated that there was no procedure 'set in stone' regarding consulting the sponsor about exclusions, but the headteacher did state the regional director would be, 'upset if I didn't ring her'; this appeared to be because the regional director wanted to be abreast of all issues within her schools. There was a similar situation at the **Midlands Academy**, and again did not imply that the Director of Education was putting pressure on the headteacher to exclude pupils as the director had only excluded twice when he was a headteacher himself. Other headteachers stated there was no pressure from the SMEs to exclude (**St Hilda's Academy, St Denis Academy, Dove Academy, Local Academy, National Academy, University Academy, St Mary's Academy, Forest Academy**). The headteacher of **Swan Academy**, who had been very negative about his relationship with his sponsor, was clear that in this aspect he had the autonomy to exclude pupils:

‘In fairness...what they’ve not done...is try to cleanse the school [remove pupils with behaviour issues]. We have had full support of that...We’re very proud of the fact we’ve kept a lot of children in who would have been permanently excluded in other schools.’ (Headteacher of Swan Academy)

The headteachers in this study have shown that their sponsors have allowed them to keep autonomy over their ability to exclude pupils with behavioural issues, although some headteachers feel they needed to discuss potential exclusions first with a member of central staff. Equally, there was no evidence to support the contention of Machin and Sandi (2018) that academy headteachers exclude more pupils than maintained headteachers as all the headteachers in the fieldwork had either excluded no pupils or only one or two pupils during their tenure. This is likely to be a result of the fact that the headteachers in my study were from the primary sector, a sector where exclusions are historically lower than in secondary schools.

Line of enquiry: Headteacher autonomy over curricula and assessment to understand if leadership is shared

Earlier in section 4.2.1, I briefly evidenced erosion of headteacher autonomy with examples of sponsors imposing curricula and assessment systems in their schools (**Acres, National, Midlands** academies). I now concentrate specifically on these two aspects across all schools in my study. Evaluating if headteachers had the relationship with their sponsor that allowed them to implement their own assessment systems and curricula was a key line of enquiry in determining if leadership is shared, this is of particular relevance given that the OECD concluded:

‘...greater autonomy in decisions related to curriculum, assessment and resource allocation tend to be associated with better student performance.’ (OECD, 2011)

Headteachers were asked a series of reflective questions regarding both assessment and curriculum as part of the semi-structured interviews; I have interpreted this evidence to tabulate the findings in order to more easily access the findings and present it in a succinct manner to the reader. As stated in chapter 3, the interpretation of the findings in this way was supported by the coding process but it should be noted that the interpretation of the qualitative data in this way involved me making judgements and a different researcher may interpret the data in a contrary way. Table 4.1 shows the interpreted data and clearly indicates that there was very little control from sponsors in my study over the curricula taught in their schools, but a greater control of the assessment systems used in the schools:

Academy	Sponsor regulation over aspects of the curriculum	Suggestions made by sponsor regarding the curriculum	Some control of the curriculum by the sponsor	Trust wide assessment system in place
Acres		Yes	Yes	Yes
Dove				Yes
Forest				
Local				
Midlands		Yes	Yes	Yes
National	Yes		Yes	Yes
St Denis				
St Hilda's				
St Mary's				
Swan				Yes
University		Yes	Yes	Yes

Blank fields indicate 'no'

**Table 4.1: Sponsor control over curricula and assessment in their academies**

The interview with the headteacher of the **University Academy** was enlightening; when asked about the sponsor's influence over the curriculum in his school he stated:

‘...it's not so much...the curriculum they would [direct]...it's that we would be expected to keep the curriculum broad and balanced and deep and interesting and so from that point of view it's keep your eyes wide as it were, rather than narrow down, but outcomes in reading, writing, grammar, maths we've got to be on top of those all the time.’

(Headteacher of University Academy)

Ensuring that schools have a ‘broad and balanced’ curriculum is one of the aspects that has been within Ofsted’s evaluation schedule for leadership and management for a number of years (Ofsted, 2018). Ensuring that a school is able to demonstrate that their curriculum is broad and balanced is therefore likely to be a key aspect of the sponsor’s role rather than necessarily the detail of what is actually covered. This is clearly the position within the University Academy MAT but also the trust has taken the decision that reading writing and maths need to be prioritised – showing a degree of control being exerted regarding the curriculum content. In the fieldwork there was only one sponsor who had put in place a universal curriculum, this being a consistent maths scheme across academies within the National Academy trust, a national multi-academy trust. The literature review identified that a maths scheme had also been put in place in another national trust, the ARK trust (Maths Mastery) (Junemann and Ball, 2013). My fieldwork therefore suggests that examples of the ‘pedagogical chain’ identified by Hill *et al.* (2012) were rare in my sample and that curriculum development was generally still developed at a school level and not *shared* greatly with the sponsor. Given that the most recent Ofsted schedule, released in 2018 has more focus on curriculum design rather than pupil data, further research is required to see if sponsors are consequently now focussing more on the development of curricular across their schools.

Over half of the trusts covered in this research had removed the headteacher's autonomy with regards to putting in place an assessment system of their choice and had instead imposed a system upon the school. In 2015, the government moved away from 'National Curriculum' levels as the means of assessing pupils and instead stated that schools should have the autonomy to develop their own systems (Department for Education, 2015c), this supported the OECD (2011) finding that autonomy over assessment is a means of improving pupil performance. There were a number of positions taken by headteachers in my research with regards to the fact their sponsor had or hadn't put in place a common assessment system. There were those who seemed ambivalent to the systems put in place by the sponsor (**Acres**, **National** and **Dove** academy headteachers) and those who were content that their sponsor had allowed them to implement their own system (**St Hilda's Academy**, **Local Academy** and **Forest Academy**); there was one headteacher who opposed the imposition of the sponsor's system (**Swan Academy**); some headteachers felt their trust should be looking to develop a common system to ensure moderation was effective (**St Denis Academy** and **St Mary's Academy**); and there were headteachers happy with the assessment system put in place as they had seen the benefits (**Midlands Academy** and **University Academy**).

The main outlier throughout the research was the headteacher of **Swan Academy**; he was opposed to the assessment system being implemented by his sponsor. The headteacher felt he had a successful system in place, but this was replaced by a commercial system which was:

‘...a very, very intensive model where children are assessed weekly.’  
(Headteacher of Swan Academy)

The headteacher felt that the new system could impact on the children’s mental health through them constantly being assessed.

The evidence collected shows that sponsors within this study give more autonomy to their headteachers over what is taught rather than how the content is assessed, findings which concur with Greany (2018) therefore suggesting sponsors may be focussed more on results than curricular. This would appear to be counterintuitive, as one would imagine that sponsors could have greater impact on results if they had more input into the curriculum being taught.

Line of enquiry: Post titles for school leaders as an indicator of whether leadership is shared

Another key insight into determining if leadership is shared was to examine the post title that sponsors give their school leaders as these can give an insight into the relationship and positional power within organisations, highlighting the distribution of power between the headteacher and the sponsor. As stated in chapter 3, for ease throughout this thesis the school leaders have all been referred to as ‘headteacher’. The typical title for the leader of a school prior to the start of the academy movement was ‘headteacher’ and still remains the case in the majority of LA schools but sponsors also use the terms ‘head of school’ and ‘principal’, both of which are ‘policy borrowed language’ from the USA where *all through* primary and secondary schools are more common, with *heads of school* over the primary and secondary phases and an overall *principal* in charge of the whole organisation. In

addition, some headteachers in sponsored academies in England are accountable to an executive headteacher which has an impact on the substantive headteacher as the use of this title conveys the fact that the headteacher doesn't have total 'executive' power in their school. Table 4.2 presents data showing the titles given to the school leaders within the academies participating in this research and those trusts who employ heads of school and executive headteachers in some of their other academies; the final column on table 4.2 also identifies if the sponsor has deployed an executive headteacher in the academies within this study:

Academy	Title given to the school leader in the fieldwork	Has the sponsor used head of school / principal titles in any of its schools?	Has the sponsor deployed an executive headteacher in the school?
Acres	Headteacher*	Yes	Yes
Dove	Principal	Yes	Yes
Forest	Head of school	Yes	No
Local	Headteacher	No	No
Midlands	Headteacher*	Yes	No
National	Principal	Yes	No
St Denis	Headteacher	No	No
St Hilda's	Headteacher	Yes	No
St Mary's	Headteacher	No	No
Swan	Headteacher	Yes	No
University	Headteacher	No	No

\*Until recently, the sponsor had referred to these headteachers as 'head of school'.

**Table 4.2 Titles afforded school leaders by their sponsors and the deployment of executive headteachers**

As table 4.2 shows, the majority of sponsors have continued to use the term headteacher in the schools within this sample but overall seven of the eleven trusts have used either the term principal or head of school within other schools within their organisation. Where the sponsor was currently or had historically used the term head of school or principal with



the interviewees (five sponsors) the participants were asked to reflect on this title. The only sponsor that was currently using the term 'head of school' in the sample was at the **Forest Academy**. Within the **Forest Academy** the school was co-led by two part-time headteachers. Both were experienced headteachers, but both were designated as heads of school on their appointment. The interviewee was asked to reflect on her opinion on the use of the title:

'I'm head of school, however I very much feel like a headteacher. I don't feel a deputy. I feel that I've got another layer above me. However, I feel it is almost like a consultancy layer that I go to and sometimes I'll run things passed them...It's almost like having a sounding board. But a sounding board that has got a real investment in my school, so for me, it's actually a positive experience and not a negative. For me, I don't really think it matters at all [the title]. I think it matters about what I do in the school...I was asked that when I chose to change from 'headteacher' to 'head of school', why would I want to take a demotion. I didn't feel it was a demotion.' (Headteacher of Forest Academy)

Whilst this head of school states she doesn't have any concerns around the title there are a couple of salient points to draw-out of the quote. Firstly, that she 'feels' like a headteacher therefore alluding to the fact that there is a perceived difference. Secondly, she clearly appreciates having a 'layer above' her – pointing to a hierarchical, power relationship. She also gives an insight into how others might perceive the title – clearly to some moving from being a 'headteacher' in one school to a 'head of school' in another was seen as a 'demotion'.

The headteacher of **Acres Academy** had originally been the school's deputy and on the departure of the previous headteacher had been made head of school; she had only

recently been designated with the title 'headteacher'. Her reflections on the title of *head of school* include:

'Parents didn't understand what was different about [the titles] - head was head and that was it. In theory, because we were still in quite a vulnerable position [the school was in Special Measures], the idea was that for Ofsted or anybody like that coming in, then [the trust] would be seen to be putting that level of support in. My personal feelings, or my experience of it was that it was just there in title and there were some things that were frustrating because I had to ask if we could do them. [The staff are] pleased now because of certain things, really little silly things that we wanted to do as staff, that the Executive Headteacher perhaps didn't like...But now we are free to make that choice, rather than being answerable to an Executive Headteacher and then Regional Director we are just answerable to governors and the Regional Director now...it did feel like they didn't quite trust me yet...' (Headteacher of Acres Academy)

This insight from the headteacher of **Acres Academy** highlights a few relevant points; firstly, that parents do not necessarily understand the difference in terminology of leaders in schools. Secondly, the sponsor seems to be using the title head of school to show outside bodies that they are being pro-active in improving the school – especially to Ofsted, although it appears that this is merely tokenistic as in other parts of the interview the headteacher was very scathing of the executive headteacher who rarely visited the school and she thought had little positive impact in the school. Such titles as Head of School and Executive Headteacher are very status focused and have the power to ensure differentiation is maintained. The quote above clearly shows that the ultimate power was resting with the executive headteacher and not the head of school and that therefore leadership was shared. The example from **Acres Academy** also shows that the *loci* of power is not static in some sponsored primary schools and can move back and forth between the headteacher and sponsor.

Within the Midlands Academy multi-academy trust, the majority of headteachers had originally been referred to as 'heads of school' but as more converter academies joined the trust, with incumbent headteachers (using the traditional title), it became more 'complicated' according to the interviewee. Therefore, the Director of Education had recently decreed that all the school leaders would be referred to as headteacher. This highlights a dilemma for sponsors who are originally formed with schools in difficulties, where they can perhaps be more directive about job titles and impose the 'head of school' title, but it would not be an attractive proposition to potential converter headteachers wanting to join trusts for them to be *demoted* to the title of head of school. The interviewee pointed out that until recently the Director of Education was executive headteacher of three of the schools within the trust and in those schools he had used the term 'head of school' for the leaders running the schools; the interviewee stated that he felt they were:

'...glorified deputies; that's why I didn't like the title of head of school myself.' (Headteacher of Midlands Academy)

The headteachers of the **Dove Academy** and the **National Academy** were the only two in this study to be referred to as 'principal' – titles that had been put in place across these national chains of schools for all their school leaders; neither headteacher had an issue with the use of this term.

Some of the other headteachers interviewed who were not referred to as heads of school also made comments on the use of the term. The headteacher of **Swan Academy** thought the title implied such leaders had less autonomy than headteachers and his impression was that:

“They would work almost as...an assistant head teacher with responsibility for teaching.” (Headteacher of Swan Academy)

The reflection of the headteacher of **Swan Academy** resonates with the findings of Greany (2018) who highlighted that often heads of school emanate from the middle leadership rank and are often focussed on improving teaching and learning, whilst the executive headteacher has overall responsibility for the school’s performance. In the trust that **St Hilda’s Academy** was a member of they don’t generally use the title ‘head of school’ but were doing so in two of its schools where there was also an executive headteacher supporting. In both cases the heads of school were previously deputy headteachers in the schools and became head of school when they were promoted (as also in the case of **Acres Academy**); it was the belief of the interviewee that it was the trust’s plan to designate them both as headteachers in the future. The fact the trust was looking to ‘promote’ the head of school to headteacher indicates the perception that there is a hierarchy between the two posts. When the interviewee was asked how she would have felt if she had been referred to as a head of school rather than headteacher when the trust took over her school she stated:

‘I’d have had to have gone.’ (Headteacher of St Hilda’s Academy)

The evidence from the fieldwork identifies that the majority of sponsors have chosen to use either the term ‘head of school’ or ‘principal’ in some or all of their schools. The ‘heads of school’ within this study are likely to fall within the ‘constrained’ model of leadership identified by Higham and Earley (2013) given that they have to report to a higher level, as they would need permission from the executive headteacher in certain aspects of

leadership or management of the school; therefore in these schools, leadership is definitely shared between the sponsor and head of school. The addition of an executive headteacher within sponsored MATs though may take some of the pressures off headteachers, especially regarding building maintenance and procurement, which can free-up headteachers to concentrate on teaching and learning. In addition, it may allow inexperienced middle / senior leaders to take on the role of leading a school whilst receiving support from an executive headteacher to mentor them (as in the case of the trusts that **St Hilda's** and **Acres** academies belong to).

My research has shown that below the CEO there are other layers of leadership within sponsored MATs e.g. regional directors (**Dove Academy** and **Acres Academy**) and executive headteachers (**Dove Academy**) acting as Senior Management Executives (SMEs) (Chapman and Salokangas, 2012); where there is no executive headteacher several sponsors had appointed school improvement advisors to be their representatives in schools; below this layer there are the headteachers / heads of school. My study has therefore indicated that the person who leads a sponsored academy isn't necessarily any longer the *primus inter pares* (first amongst equals) (Peetz, 2015) within the organisation as this may now sit outside of the school with a SME.

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It is clear from the interviews that all the headteachers within this study had lost some of their autonomy on joining a sponsored trust and therefore their relationship with the sponsor may be more akin to a subordinate, taking instructions from a higher authority. However, the interviews identify that the degree of control from the sponsor is not

consistent across trusts and therefore some headteachers have more autonomy than others in the sponsored system. The heralded advantage of academisation i.e. freedom for headteachers to run their schools in the direction they want without the influence of outside organisations (Department for Education, 2010; 2016) therefore does not exist for all academy headteachers. Sponsor SMEs control a raft of aspects regarding the running of their schools, including assessment, curriculum, capital projects, recruitment and finance. Most headteachers in this study have retained their autonomy over admissions and exclusions, but in reality *any* autonomy that the headteachers have is as a result of the sponsor delegating this to them – it is not by *right* of being the headteacher as *primus inter pares* any longer. Therefore, leadership in sponsored primary academies is now co-created and co-owned by multiple players. What is difficult to reconcile is the headteachers' statements in my fieldwork that they have retained their autonomy when clearly a number had lost some of the control to their sponsor; it is unclear if the headteachers do not see the obvious contradictions in their statements, or if there is a misconception around the term autonomy. Could it be that some headteachers have the perception that *autonomy* relates not to leadership but to their ability to *day-to-day manage* their school? The inconsistencies that headteachers gave in their interviews resonate with the contradictions between headteachers' perceptions of autonomy and those of sponsors identified in Greany (2018).

The evidence in this fieldwork questions the ability of headteachers of sponsored academies to be responsive to local and contextual needs as put forward by Leithwood and Menzies (1998) as a strength of the site-based management system. This therefore may

impact on the ability of headteachers to tackle 'wicked social issues' (Ball, 2012b), ultimately leading to the inability to eliminate these in schools in highly directed sponsored multi-academy trusts, as headteachers may not be able to put in place the necessary measures to support their pupils. Therefore the sponsored academy movement in England does not appear to be an extension of the site-based management system started in the 1980s, rather the movement is leading to less autonomy for a significant number of headteachers with an increased role from the *centre*, albeit a different *centre* to the one prior to Local Management of Schools.

#### **4.2.2 Can sponsored headteachers establish their own vision and values in their academies?**

Given that the literature review identified that transformational leadership is often presented as the most effective form of leadership, where a leader's leadership is driven by moral purpose (Burns, 1978 cited in Allix, 2000) it was important to gain the sponsored headteachers' perspectives of their ability to implement their own vision and values within their academies, although, as Cady *et al.* (2011) stated, leaders often have difficulty articulating the difference between these and cite Collins (2009) in claiming that frequently leaders focus their time on the mechanical element of writing a statement rather than enacting it. Therefore, a key factor in determining the relationship headteachers have with their sponsors and understanding their experience of the sponsored primary academy phenomenon is to establish the agency headteachers have in implementing their own vision and values, as this will give an insight into the autonomy they are afforded and the trust the sponsor places in their headteachers. The literature review has shown that there

is limited research into vision setting in *primary* academies, although Gibson (2015) did undertake a review of secondary academies, concluding at the early stages in the development of an academy it was the sponsor who set the vision, his study centred on pre-2010 academies. Equally, the findings of Greany (2018) did not distinguish between the primary and secondary headteacher reflections on vision, although he did conclude that a large majority of headteachers and staff in sponsored academies could articulate and shared their trust's vision.

In my fieldwork, when headteachers were questioned about their capacity to establish the school's own vision and values, most answered this by referring to 'developing' or 'drawing-up' the school's vision statement rather than making reference to their ability to actually implement the vision and live by certain values; therefore, they often referred to a 'technical procedure', akin to the observations of Collins (2009) as cited in Cady *et al.* (2011). This highlighted the difficulty in evaluating this aspect – clearly 'vision' and 'values' is a very complex concept, and it was not always easy for the headteachers to articulate it.

The majority of the headteachers had developed their vision / values document in association with their staff and governors, but there were two schools whose sponsor had an input into their school's vision and values. The headteacher of the **Forest Academy** stated that the vision for the school was a shared one between the school and the sponsor, which had been shaped by the staff. Given that there are only two schools within the MAT (the sponsor, who was the local successful secondary school, and the school in my study), developing a joint vision was clearly manageable. The headteacher of the **National**



**Academy**, an academy with a philanthropic sponsor, formed with a Christian ethos stated that the sponsor had established dispositions based on Christian doctrine to be developed in their schools, which the headteacher felt those of faith and of no faith could accept. Reflecting on his relationship with the sponsor with regards to his ability to implement his own vision for the school the headteacher of the **National Academy** stated:

‘They have that balance really between embedding an ethos MAT-wide but also allowing the academies to keep their character as well.’  
(Headteacher of National Academy)

In fact, this headteacher was relieved that he didn’t have to work on developing the school’s vision:

‘I’m just glad there was someone there to do that already, rather than we’ve got to think of it ourselves.’ (Headteacher of National Academy)

This may point to a school leader who is happy to be a manager rather than a leader in some aspects.

Four of the interviewees were leaders within schools with a Christian distinctiveness (**National, St Hilda’s, St Denis, and St Mary’s** academies), yet only the headteachers of **St Denis** and **National** academies made any reference to Christian values when discussing values within their schools. The headteacher of **St Denis Academy** stated that the sponsor had no input into developing the school’s vision and values as this had been left to the headteacher and governors, although the headteacher did state he was a committed Christian and therefore he was in sympathy with the sponsor’s values.

The headteacher of **University Academy** stated that the school's vision had been established by the school's senior leadership team and the governing body, but as they had chosen to join the sponsor as a converter academy they had chosen a sponsor whose values aligned to their own. The headteacher was committed to raising aspiration in a community that he felt was disenfranchised and lacking aspiration and he believed that having a university as a sponsor could help raise this.

The headteacher of **Dove Academy** had been in post for four terms when interviewed but reflected that he needed to revisit the school's vision and values, although currently he felt prevented on leading the school in the direction he really wanted to; this was as a result of the school recently receiving its second 'requires improvement' judgement from Ofsted:

'With this school, there is a lot of needing to *play the game* at the moment whereas given ultimate time I would take a bit of a different approach than the one I'm taking. I would make it more values based if you like. I would knit the curriculum far closer together, but I don't have the time to get the results up. The results need to come up more quickly.'

(Headteacher of Dove Academy)

The implication in this statement is that developing a values-based ethos and an integrated curriculum could impact negatively on the school's assessment results, although the headteacher's professional opinion is that this is needed for his pupils. When the headteacher was asked to reflect if he felt constrained to implement his own values currently by the sponsor he replied:

'I think it's government policy because I know when they [the sponsor] have... meetings with the DFE, the first school the DFE wants to discuss is us because of the historic low results. I think if they [the DFE] see the results come up then it bides us that bit more time if you like, to get it, to embed things properly.' (Headteacher of Dove Academy)

This therefore illustrates the conflict some headteachers can experience between implementing a values-led approach versus having to improve academic results. It also reinforces that leadership can be contingent on the context within which the headteacher finds themselves as this was a school in an area of high deprivation with achievement significantly below the national averages. Whilst the headteacher feels that the DFE are to 'blame' for his inability to put in place his own vision, rather than the sponsor, it should be noted that the sponsor has taken a conscious decision to inform the headteacher that the DFE was putting pressure on them – a potentially passive aggressive approach where they pass the blame for the pressure on to another organisation.

Similarly, the headteacher of **Swan Academy** also felt constrained in implementing his vision and values. He stated he had put in place a vision and values document when he commenced at the school (which sounds a very 'directed' approach from the headteacher), but he was very realistic and stated, 'I feel ultimately my ability to action them [the values] or translate them into everyday practice is restricted by them [the sponsor].' He felt that the sponsor was very 'results-driven.' Clearly, the headteacher of **Swan Academy** feels he is being pulled in what appears to be an opposing direction by his sponsor and there is an apparent lack of faith by the sponsor in the headteacher by not allowing him to implement what he feels is right for the pupils of his school. An interesting contention by this headteacher was that he saw being 'results-driven' as not being 'values-driven', whereas in reality being driven by results can be seen as values led, just potentially different values to those the headteacher subscribes to.

The experiences described by the majority of the headteachers showed that the relationship most sponsors have with their headteachers in this study is to allow them to develop their own set of values and vision for their schools, independent of them. This would support the government's plan in the 2010 education white-paper, as they wanted:

'...every school to be able to shape its own character...frame its own ethos...free of either central or local bureaucratic control.'

(Department for Education, 2010, p12)

The autonomy evidenced in this fieldwork regarding headteacher's ability to implement their own vision and values seems at odds with the sponsored school principles, as it would appear to be a missed opportunity for trusts to ensure that their vision for education is enacted across all their schools, especially those sponsors with a faith foundation; it might be concluded that the sponsors in this research were potentially not *typical*, as Greany (2018) concluded 86% of headteachers in his study felt that their staff were implementing the MAT's vision, rather than a school-led vision; a similar conclusion was reached by Gibson (2014). It may be though that my results are not in-line with Greany (2018) due to the size of my sample, or the fact my study focuses only on primary sponsored headteachers. Yet, analysing my evidence from the headteachers it is a more complex and nuanced picture than the one that might be initially perceived. For example, there was evidence that headteachers had joined the school or selected the sponsor for their school because of the sponsor's vision and values (**St Denis** and **University** academies) and therefore the headteachers were aligned to the sponsor's values (also evidenced in the larger sample undertaken by Greany, 2018). **St Hilda's**, **St Mary's** and **St Denis** academies were originally Church of England primary schools and as they are now part of a diocesan

sponsored MAT they should already be sympathetic to their sponsor's values. Also there were examples of academy headteachers co-creating the sponsor's vision and values (**Agres** and **St Hilda's** academies) and the headteacher of **Dove Academy** had recently been involved in ensuring the sponsor's values were still relevant, a feature also identified in other sponsored MATs by Greany (2018). There was though evidence from two headteachers of a feeling that they had little agency to implement their own vision as a result of either the sponsor (**Swan Academy**), or because of government policy (**Dove Academy**), as a result for them vision and values may feel imposed upon their schools. As a result, these headteachers may not be able to exhibit the transformational leadership outlined by Burns (1978, cited in Allix, 2000) as they may not have bought into the values being promoted by the sponsor.

Therefore, there is a group of headteachers who could be classed as *sympathisers* of the sponsor's values and those involved in developing / reviewing their aims who could be seen as *democratic participants* – these headteachers therefore are more likely to be *on-message* when developing their own school's vision and values, even though they appear to be constructing these autonomously; further research is needed to examine if in these circumstances headteachers are replicating the sponsor's values, consciously or unconsciously. Whereas there is another group of headteachers who could be conceptualised as mere *implementers* of the sponsor's vision and values. Therefore, the evidence regarding headteacher autonomy over vision and values further extends our understanding of the relationship sponsored primary headteachers have with their trusts.

In addition, it extends our knowledge specifically of how leadership is lived-out in sponsored trusts.

#### **4.2.3 How do primary headteachers in sponsored academies perceive their relationship with their sponsor?**

Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 give some evidence into how headteachers in my study perceive their relationship with their sponsors and supports in developing our understanding but some additional, specific questions were asked about their perceptions to understand these relationships further; these questions focussed on:

- how sponsors hold headteachers to account – this was a key line of enquiry in order to examine the *power-relationship* that exists between the headteachers and their sponsors;
- what does the remuneration of headteachers within sponsored academies indicate about the relationship;
- headteacher reflections on the pastoral support provided to them by their sponsor;
- the overall perceptions of headteachers on their relationship with the sponsor.

##### Line of enquiry: Headteachers' perceptions of their accountability

A key aspect in determining the headteachers' perceptions of their relationships with the sponsor was to explore the sponsors' roles in holding them to account. As outlined in the literature review, there are many ways that headteachers and schools are now held to account (Ehren and Perryman, 2018; Smith and Benavot, 2019), with Greany (2018) also identifying those now involved in doing this. As outlined in the interview schedule (appendix B), one of the specific questions to headteachers in the sample was 'how does the sponsor hold you to account?' The answers to this question show that headteachers

were heavily focussed on the *individual* level (Ehren and Perryman, 2018) through their performance management / appraisal system, rather than the *organizational, network* and *community* levels as identified by Ehren and Perryman (2018).

Prior to academisation, the undertaking of headteacher performance management would have rested with the local governing body, although this may have been partly *outsourced* to the local authority through a *buy-back* advisory service or to a private consultancy company. The independent advisor would have an educational background to guide governors in setting the headteacher's objectives and reviewing / assessing them; there is no such legal requirement for academy leaders.

The fieldwork has shown that there is no consistent approach to the setting and reviewing of headteacher performance objectives across the academy sponsors in my study. There are some sponsors that have continued with the previous local authority model with an external advisor supporting governors with the process (**St Denis, Forest** and **University** academies). The headteacher of **Forest Academy** did state that she liked the use by the sponsor of an external advisor as it gave her the opportunity to discuss her performance with 'someone who's not part of it'. There were examples of slight variations of this model in a couple of trusts in my study; the **St Hilda's Academy** had the same system as the previous LA model but the governors had to select the external advisor from a list of approved consultants provided by the sponsor rather than the governors independently sourcing an advisor. In **St Hilda's Academy**, the sponsor advisor undertakes the review with governors. In other academies, the sponsor had replaced the external advisor role with a

member of the central trust team but retained involvement from governors, for example at **Acres Academy** the headteacher's performance management was undertaken by the regional director with the chair of the governing body 'sitting in' on the review; this gives the impression that the role of governors has been diminished since academisation within this trust and the role of the independent advisor has been removed.

In other trusts, the governors and external advisor had both been removed from the process completely and replaced with centrally employed staff (**Swan, National** and **Dove** academies). The headteacher of **Swan Academy** was not happy that there were no governors involved in his performance management and had actually consulted with his professional association regarding the legitimacy of this; his sponsor had chosen to have only the CEO undertaking headteacher reviews. The headteacher thought the performance management process was flawed as he had been set 16 performance objectives with no measurable success criteria. The setting of an unrealistic number of targets was also seen at **St Hilda's**; this may have been mitigated in the previous LA maintained school model as the external advisor should have advised governors against such a large number of objectives. The headteacher at Swan Academy also felt held to account at the *individual* level through requests to attend meetings with other headteachers where he had to justify the school's data in front of all the other headteachers – he found this a humiliating process.

The fieldwork also found other aspects of how headteachers were held to account by sponsors that were at the *individual* level identified by Ehren and Perryman (2018). Again,



different sponsors are approaching the additional accountability measures in a variety of ways. My previous experience of accountability as a headteacher of three LA maintained schools over a 14 year period was that in addition to the governors' performance management review meetings I would receive either termly or half-termly meetings with a LA advisor, with these meetings being used to inform the advisor of the progress the school had made and then to undertake some joint observations as a means of *quality assuring* my judgements; the advisor would then issue a report to the governors, who in turn would hold me to account. This is a model that the trust **St Hilda's Academy** was a member of had replicated, as had the **St Denis Academy** trust, albeit with half-termly visits and the requirement of the headteacher to present a termly progress report to a School Improvement Committee at the diocese headquarters. The headteacher of **St Denis Academy**, a school sponsored by the Church of England diocese, found that these accountability systems in the trust were not challenging at all:

'I think, in terms of how you run the school, the local authority in [previous LA] had more challenge, whereas here I seem to be more involved with the Diocese and things at the Diocese than I was back in [previous LA] but the challenge doesn't seem as tough.' (Headteacher of St Denis Academy)

When questioned further about the level of challenge, the headteacher stated he felt the challenge was not as effective as it could be, 'because [the diocesan director of education's] role is more pastoral.' This perception of the diocesan director of education's role is insightful and will be discussed further later.

At the **Acres Academy** the headteacher, deputy headteacher and chair of governors are required to attend a termly meeting chaired by the regional director and other members

of the central team. At these meetings targets are discussed and the sponsor determines the level of support that will be required from the central team including access to an 'Associate School Leader'. The Associate School Leader role is akin to an executive headteacher model and therefore there is the implicit threat here that if the headteacher and senior leaders are not undertaking their roles effectively, according to the sponsor, there may be the imposition of external, executive leadership within the school.

Ehren and Perryman (2018) highlighted that some sponsors were undertaking organizational accountability – where they examine the impact of the school on the whole organisation; such an approach would include examining how a school is delivering on the trust's strategic aims. Ehren and Perryman (2018) give the example of school reviews and peer-to-peer reviews as examples of how this form of accountability is delivered. Such reviews were evident in some of the schools within my research. The headteacher of the **Local Academy** was finding that the sponsor was holding him more to account than his previous LA through regular school reviews. The headteacher found these reviews more productive than the LA reviews as they were not only focussed on pupil achievement but on wider aspects, such as attendance and pupil behaviour. He also found that the accountability was more in a 'partnership' model.

The headteacher of **Swan Academy** also experienced peer-peer reviews facilitated by his sponsor. These were carried in the style of Ofsted inspections– referred to as 'mocksteds' by the headteacher; the headteacher had major concerns regarding the legitimacy of these

reviews as he felt they were undertaken by inexperienced headteachers, which he didn't feel helped the school to move forward.

The headteacher of **Dove Academy** outlined a potentially very onerous accountability structure within his trust that highlights the number of individuals now involved in holding headteachers to account, supporting the findings of Greany (2018); At the **Dove Academy** not only is there a governing body but also an executive principal and a regional director holding him to account:

'It feels a little bit, and this is where I get very frustrated actually, is that you get held to account by your exec principal, you get held to account by your regional director, and then you get held to account by the governors as well. It just feels there's the accountability, which I feel all comes back to me...you think, could it work as being the exec principal holds me to account, regional director holds exec principal to account.' (Headteacher of Dove Academy)

As well as weekly visits from the executive headteacher the regional director also acts as his school improvement advisor and therefore leads at least half termly review meetings. As the headteacher states, this leads to *frustration* on his part due to the overlap and no-doubt increased workload and stress. The sponsor also determines what monitoring the headteacher should be undertaking and requests that this is uploaded to a trust calendar and it is known that the regional director can choose to call-in to see the monitoring taking place, although the headteacher did state that the director had never actually done this. This may illustrate potential control being exerted over the headteacher by the sponsor to ensure that headteachers keep to their monitoring timetable, and therefore an example of coercive behaviour in holding leaders to account. Despite this, the headteacher did go on to state that he felt the way the school was being helped to move forward was by the

sponsor holding him to account; this included through termly meetings with a 'coach' (who was an ex-headteacher turned management consultant) – the consultant had described his role to the headteacher as being to 'disrupt your life' through asking challenging questions; the headteacher said this had led to a number of headteachers stepping down, as the 'coach' had, 'helped them pick out their future direction'. Again, this sponsor could be using coercive behaviours in order to *move-on* headteachers without necessarily following approved procedures, such as capability and competency.

Multiple individuals involved in accountability could also be seen to be at play within the **Midlands Academy** trust where a hub-governance model had been recently adopted. For each school in the trust there is a local governing body which is overseen by a hub governing body, chaired by the CEO. As the hub model was in its infancy it was unclear what role it was going to have:

'The hub governance is about getting together and sharing best practice between the schools and ensuring there's that slightly higher-up accountability. The schemes of delegation...have been written around that. If there were issues that need escalating beyond local governance, it would go to them.' (Headteacher of Midlands Academy)

In addition, the headteacher's response to how the sponsor holds him to account gives an insight into the degree of accountability the headteacher is experiencing, and those involved with this. This accountability structures with this sponsor included:

- weekly reports to be emailed to the Director of Education;
- three-weekly review meetings with the Director of Education;
- annual performance management reviews undertaken by the CEO;

- accountability to the school's governing body – including through assessment of key performance indicators (KPIs);
- accountability to the hub governors;
- ultimate accountability to the board of trustees.

At the **Forest Academy** the two joint CEOs take it in turn to visit the school on Mondays and Fridays, including undertaking joint monitoring with the headteacher once per week. Although the headteacher found the support of the CEOs helpful, other headteachers might find such levels of support / challenge as intrusive and evidence of a lack of trust in the headteacher's own skills to lead the school. It appears that in both **Midlands** and **Forest** academies the sponsor is having more involvement in the day-to-day leadership of the school than would occur in a LA maintained school model.

In contrast to the potentially onerous multiple layers of governance at **Midlands Academy**, the governing bodies at **Swan** and **Forest** academies have been removed and the schools are governed directly by the sponsor board and SMEs. The **National Academy** sponsor had also removed its governing body but had constituted a local consultative group of stakeholders in its place as the sponsor sees the central staff as having the governance role within their schools. Within each of the five regions that the trust serves there is a regional director whom this headteacher sees as taking on the role previously undertaken by the chair of governors:

'He's effectively my chair of governors, really, but of course, because he's a former headteacher I can talk to him about a lot of stuff as well, so it's a bit of a cross between your chair of governors and school improvement advisor...You feel like it's somebody who..."gets it" and they are really supportive.' (Headteacher of National Academy)

The statement by the headteacher of **National Academy** resonates with the research of Breslin (2018) who stated regional directors brought a 'directness' which was previously not there in the relationship between headteacher and chair of governors. The removal of governing bodies at **Swan, Forest** and **National** academies gives further evidence to the contention of West and Wolfe (2018) that some sponsors are removing local accountability.

The responses from the participants regarding accountability were one of the most informative aspects of the interviews in establishing the range of relationships that are currently at play within sponsored multi-academy trusts. What was evident was a spectrum of accountability, undertaken by a host of different players, which concurs with the findings of Greany (2018). There was also evident a number of accountability layers in place, measuring different aspects, akin to the findings of Ehren and Perryman (2018). A range of organisational behaviours was also identified in my data including the use of potential control, coercion and humiliation to manage headteachers, combined with a range of models regarding the level of trust that sponsors place in their headteachers. As can be seen, the formal review of headteacher's performance is not consistent in these sponsored MATs – with some sponsors deciding to remain with the previous LA model and others moving totally away from it; equally sponsored headteachers are experiencing very different levels of overall accountability, some with numerous levels of accountability.

Line of enquiry: Headteacher remuneration as an indicator of the relationship between sponsors and headteachers

There is no requirement for sponsors to follow the national guidance on teachers' and leaders' pay in their schools – this is a freedom *granted* to them as academy sponsors. As a result, sponsors can choose to pay less or more than the *national rate* to their headteachers than that recommended by the School Teachers' Review Body. Headteachers were asked to reflect on their pay in order to examine if their sponsors were or were not following national guidance as a way of eliciting further evidence regarding their relationship with the sponsor.

In the majority of schools, the sponsor was remunerating the headteacher equivalently to what they would have received in the LA maintain sector (**St Denis, St Hilda's, St Mary's, Local, University** and **Midlands** academies). Two national trusts were paying above the national rate in order to attract headteachers to their academies (**Dove** and **National** academies). Whilst the headteacher of **Acres Academy** received less salary than she would have done outside of the academy sector, although she felt this was compensated for by the fact she could call her regional director at any point to receive additional support. The headteacher of the **Swan Academy** was paid on the same national scale as other headteachers but a complex system had been put in place regarding performance management meaning it would take longer to get to the top of his pay-range than most LA headteachers.

Wolfe and West (2018) cite evidence from the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts which shows that headteachers in academies are paid an average £4,000 more than their contemporaries in maintained school. In my study there was only evidence of two headteachers being paid above LA headteachers, both of whom belonged to national chains with significant numbers of schools. In my fieldwork there was no evidence to suggest that sponsors are using pay to control their headteachers or have a relationship where they undervalue their contribution through pay decisions, other than at **Swan** and **Acres** academies.

Line of enquiry: Headteacher reflections of the pastoral support afforded to them by their sponsor

Headteachers within the research were asked to reflect upon the pastoral support given to them by their sponsor as a way of further examining the relationship between headteachers and their sponsors and their experience of the phenomenon of sponsorship. It should be noted that sponsors as employers have a duty of care for their staff, including headteachers, this duty of care also includes mental health. The headteachers of **Dove** and **Local** academies both stated the often-heard statement in headship, 'it's a very lonely job', which reiterates the need for effective pastoral support.

The headteachers of **St Hilda's**, **St Mary's** and **Local** academies had not experienced any major health difficulties and therefore had not had to call on specific pastoral support. Whereas several headteachers in the study had experienced problems where they felt



pastoral support was needed. The headteacher of **St Denis Academy** had found the pastoral support very poor recently during a period of ill health:

‘When I was ill last term...you had the, “I hope [name of headteacher] is okay” kind of thing. But we didn't have anything beyond that and my deputy was still contacting me because she was struggling with certain things. I was almost running the school from the hospital bed or from home and I came back. I came back...my intention was to come back part time, so I came back...and had a conversation with [school advisor] during that time. And I said, “this is what's happening”, and there was no, “well we need to put someone else in to help so that contact doesn't happen”, or “we need someone [the deputy] can phone, another head, so she doesn't need to phone you and ask you”. There was none of that...good pastoral support would be, “you need to leave him alone.”’

(Headteacher of St Denis Academy)

In his reflections regarding accountability, the headteacher of **St Denis Academy** had stated he felt that some of the challenge from the trust was weak, but he thought this was partly as a result of the diocesan director of education's role being, ‘more pastoral’, rather than to challenge, although the above quote does not suggest the sponsor was putting effective pastoral support in place. The evidence from the headteacher of **St Denis Academy** highlights a potential conflict of interest in diocesan-led multi academy trusts where the diocesan director of education has elected / been appointed as CEO of the trust – examples of this dual role were evidenced by Male (2017).

Equally, the **University Academy** headteacher described the pastoral support provided by his trust as ‘pretty zero’ – although there is a 24-hour ‘helpline’ if required; the headteacher of **National Academy** was also negative regarding his sponsor's pastoral care arrangements. At the time of the interview with the headteacher of the **Swan Academy** he

was going through a difficult period with the sponsor and was very negative about the relationship – in fact a few months after the interview he resigned his post and left the trust. He stated that he felt the sponsor was having a negative impact on his mental well-being, with his belief there was ineffective pastoral support for him and his staff; for the headteacher this poor pastoral care was manifested in the fact that the MAT used an occupational health service 200 miles away on the south coast which meant that support was by telephone rather than face-to-face, which he thought would not effectively support a member of staff with mental health issues.

Within the **Dove Academy** the headteacher had concerns about the pastoral support he was receiving. Recently the school had received a second ‘requires improvement’ judgement from Ofsted and the headteacher found this difficult to accept:

‘I suppose what I was annoyed about with them [the sponsor] is post Ofsted no one came to check if I was alright...I think that they can very much go on what next, what next, what next, what's next? I need a bit of all right, that's gone really well, I'm pleased with that, let's now go on to the next thing and work on this.’ (Headteacher of Dove Academy)

The headteacher of **Midlands Academy** had a prolonged period of absence due to ill-health but the support from his sponsor was in stark contrast to that received by some of the other headteachers in my study:

‘He's very good [the Director of Education]. There's a clear understanding that if I need an off-the-record conversation, I can just pick the phone up and have a chat. Obviously, having been off for so long, that's been very important to me. Coming back, he's been extremely supportive. I had the usual occupational health check and he was very clear about that, "this is to support you;" I know it's not always like that with occupational health. The first few weeks back, he came to see me once a week, instead of the

usual three weeks just to check how I was doing. He made it absolutely clear to everybody, including the chair of governors and all the staff that, "you must not contact [the headteacher]."

(Headteacher of Midlands Academy)

The headteacher of **Dove Academy** stated that the main pastoral support he received was from fellow headteachers in the sponsored MAT, this he felt worked more effectively within an academy trust model than a LA, as:

‘in a local authority there can always be a little bit of competition between schools because you have the pupils that if you like transfer between you, there’s always “what's the school up the road doing” and you have staff that might transfer between you.’ (Headteacher of Dove Academy)

The effective support of colleague headteachers within the MAT was also echoed by the headteachers of **University, Local** and **Acres** academies. The headteacher of the **Local Academy** school reflected that he felt part of a ‘small family’ that ‘cares’ for one another, which he didn’t feel quite the same about as a headteacher belonging to a large LA. The headteacher of **Acres Academy** also felt that headteachers within the trust gave each other mutual pastoral support which she felt was important, but a concern she had was that she was the only headteacher in that county who belonged to the sponsor and therefore her network was more limited as a result; this is potentially a risk with non-geographical, national sponsors.

The fieldwork has identified that the pastoral support afforded to headteachers to ensure their well-being is varied, with some headteachers feeling highly supported, whilst others were highly critical of their sponsor in this aspect. The degree of support offered by the trust is likely to significantly impact on headteacher perceptions of the relationship they have with the sponsor. As a result, the relationships they have with the sponsor appear to

range from what could be classified as *supportive* and *caring* to *unsupportive* and *uncaring*. In the absence of effective pastoral support, many headteachers had developed links with colleagues via different networks to provide support. Such mutually supportive networks are most likely to be found in the group of headteachers within the MAT, but this may prove more difficult for headteachers in non-geographically MATs, potentially leaving them isolated. To-date, no literature pertaining to pastoral support for headteachers in MATs has been located to compare the findings in my fieldwork to.

Line of enquiry: Headteachers' explicit perceptions of their relationships with their sponsors

The questioning of headteachers in the semi-structured interviews drew out insight into the relationships between sponsors and their headteachers and their experiences through shining a light on a variety of aspects of the sponsored academy phenomenon. At the end of the interviews, headteachers were asked to reflect more explicitly on their own perceptions of their relationship with their sponsor. Three headteachers simply described their relationship with the sponsor as 'positive' or 'good' (**St Hilda's**, **Dove**, and **Midlands** academies) and the headteacher of **Local Academy** stated he was 'delighted' with his sponsor. The headteachers of **St Hilda's** and **Midlands** academies both summed up their relationship with the sponsor as 'good' but what was interesting is that they spoke about this relationship in terms of the relationship with the central staff member that they mainly worked with, for example their school advisor or Director of Education. Further research is needed to examine if there is a correlation between the relationship a headteacher has with their main contact in the sponsored trust and their overall perceptions of the sponsor.

Reflecting on her relationship with the sponsor, the headteacher of **St Mary's Academy** stated:

'I trust them to look after me and my staff...I do feel like we're under their wing instead of it just being me...and that they're more bothered, as a little school...about us than the local authority...'

(Headteacher of St Mary's Academy)

This comment echoes that of the headteacher of **Local Academy** and highlights a strength that some sponsors may have over LAs, especially large LAs, where headteachers of small schools may feel unimportant. The headteacher of **Local Academy** also felt that by being a small MAT his trust was able to be more supportive and the lack of secondary headteachers in the MAT meant the headteachers did not have 'secondary [headteachers] telling us what to do'. Although the sponsor being relatively small was seen as a strength for the headteacher of **Local Academy** it was clear that the headteacher of **Forest Academy** felt her sponsor was too small, with just her school and its secondary school sponsor in the trust. Whilst the headteacher was committed to the school she felt that if she had an opportunity to join another sponsor with more primary schools within it, she would. She felt that she needed primary specialism from her sponsor for 'best practice and longevity', which she wasn't currently able to access from them. This is a potential flaw for a small sponsor whose expertise is within another phase and may cause issues with the relationship with the headteacher. Should the headteacher of **Forest Academy** decide that the best option for her academy would be to find another trust she would not have the power to do this as the school no longer exists as a legal entity in its own right, as illustrated by West and Wolfe (2018).

The headteacher of **Acres Academy** stated that she wouldn't chose to leave the sponsor if she had the opportunity because of the support the school receives from them. In fact, the vast majority of headteachers spoke in very positive terms about the services that their sponsor provides to them, especially as this allows them to concentrate on aspects that they feel confident regarding, such as teaching and learning which concurs with the findings of Greany (2018). Such services include finance, HR, estates and legal support.

The pronouns used by the interviewees regarding their relationship with their sponsor gives an insight into their perceptions of the relationship as they use 'they' and 'them' rather than 'us' and 'we'. It appears that many headteachers see their sponsor as separate to them and their schools, in a model akin to that of LAs providing services to their schools which they would 'buy back' - this may imply that they don't necessarily see themselves and their schools as being part of the sponsor's company. In an additional reimagining of the neo-liberal movement, the headteacher of **National Academy** also refers to the school as the 'customer' of the MAT. My findings support the contention of Amanda Spielman (Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools) who stated that schools often see themselves as 'separate' from the leadership of the multi academy trust (Spielman, 2018).

The headteacher of **National Academy** described his relationship with the sponsor as 'positive' and had to think carefully to find a negative, which for him was regarding the management of the finances of the school as it had taken until the January for the sponsor to inform him what his underspend from the previous academic year had been, which had restricted what he could spend in the current financial year. Similarly, the headteacher of

the **University Academy** felt that he would like more control over his finances and he was resentful that some of his underspend was being 'pooled' to support other schools, schools he felt that had joined the sponsored MAT after poor due diligence, where financial issues in these schools had not been taken sufficiently into account. Equally, the headteacher of **St Denis Academy** was very negative about the support provided by the finance company contracted by the sponsor and the support that had been brokered for the school when it received its first requires improvement judgment from Ofsted. As previously discussed, the headteachers of **Local** and **Midlands** academies had also been negative regarding the control of finances by their sponsors.

The headteacher of **Swan Academy** was able to identify positives regarding his sponsor, despite his many concerns, including the fact that he perceived that within the local authority implementing procedures and systems could be quite lengthy, in particular he referred to ill-health capability where he felt his trust had quicker processes and consequently, was able to dismiss staff quicker; this gives an indication that some terms and conditions for staff may be eroded in sponsored trusts. But he felt that his trust was not always focussed on pupils; when pressed on what he felt their focus was he stated:

'I think it's the continued growth and the business aspect of the trust that are at the forefront for a lot of the time. I also think that people find themselves in positions where they've not necessarily had any training or been through any interview process to run it. The business model kind of predominates.' (Headteacher of Swan Academy)

The headteacher appears to have little respect for the trust as he contends their focus is centred on their growth as a MAT. The rapid growth of MATs has been a highly critical element of the academy movement (Monk, 2015; House of Commons Education

Committee, 2017; Hill, undated). The reasons for trusts committing to such rapid growth are likely to be multi-faceted (Baxter and Floyd, 2019), including pressure from the DFE (Monk, 2015) but may also be linked to *empire building* by CEOs and the need to increase the income of the MAT in order to facilitate greater support for their schools. The rapid growth might also be a contributing factor in the headteacher of **Swan Academy** reflecting that some of those in charge within the MAT may not have the requisite skills as these were staff who originally were employed by the founding secondary school. This also plays into the debate about who is best positioned to run MATs, educationalists or those with experience of business management, but not necessarily experience of education.

When the headteacher of **Swan Academy** was asked if his sponsor was supporting his school to develop, he stated:

‘I actually find them a considerable barrier to school improvement...the self-interest within them means that it is not necessarily in their best interest for certain schools, in certain places to move rapidly.’

(Headteacher of Swan Academy)

This statement relates to the fact that when Ofsted placed his school into special measures it took nearly two years for the forced academisation to take place but during that time the proposed sponsor was brought in by the DFE to lead the Interim Executive Board. The headteacher felt that the sponsor was keen for the school to remain in special measures until they actually started running the school so that they could take the ‘glory’ for removing the school from measures; as it happens the conversion was so lengthy that the school had come out of special measures before it was completed.



A key aspect of the interview with the headteacher of **Swan Academy** was the fear that he felt regarding his inability to make a complaint about the trust, given that the MAT is his employer. On 'regular' occasions the headteacher had found himself in conflict / disagreement with a decision made by the sponsor but felt powerless to act upon this:

'...you have to be really careful because you wouldn't want to face any sort of disciplinary because you have no governing body to go to, you have no internal whistle blow because you'd have to whistle blow to the very people who are doing it...because positional power is an interesting set-up within these things, that if people are allowed to talk freely and on a level with one another and they express concerns that's very difficult when say they can ultimately decide the future of your employment or whether you face disciplinary sanctions or not...You are beholden to them because they're your governors, they're your employers, they're your bosses. Free speech and freedom of expression aren't things that are necessarily valued, unless they're in very, very, very tight parameters determined by their needs.' (Headteacher of Swan Academy)

The contention of the headteacher that he felt his 'freedom of expression' was restricted is clearly a concern. The headteacher of **Acres Academy** also described the power her sponsor had over her, describing her relationship with the sponsor as 'supportive' but added 'I wouldn't cross them':

'...if you work hard and your school's improving, or even if the school's struggling, as long as you are honest about where things are, I think that's the thing. As long as you don't try to cover anything up, that's what I've found... And if there is a problem, if you go to them so that it shows that you know your school well, then the relationship's good.'

(Headteacher of Acres Academy)

The statements by the headteacher of **Acres** and **Swan** academies give an insight into the power dynamics that can be at play between sponsors and their headteachers where a potential culture of threats can exist.

\*

The evidence presented in section 4.2.3 supports in developing our understanding of how headteachers in sponsored academies perceive their relationship with their sponsor. This relationship is clearly complex and there is no one relationship model at play within the primary sponsored academy sector. Some sponsors have a very tight accountability structure in place around their academy headteachers with a hierarchical approach to hold leaders to account. Whereas other sponsors have a much lighter-touch model. The sometimes-high levels of accountability bring into question the sponsors' trust of their headteachers and this must therefore have a significant impact on the headteacher relationship with the sponsor. Given that there is generally a paucity of candidates for headteacher appointments it may be that such onerous methods of accountability put in place by sponsors might act as a deterrent to teachers who aspire to leadership roles. The evidence collected from the interviews also suggests that a number of sponsors are adopting *managerial* approaches with their headteachers and the sponsored academy process can be seen as another expansion of the process, therefore potentially leading to an erosion of headteacher autonomy in these relationships.

A key indicator regarding the relationship between headteachers and sponsors is the evidence presented concerning pastoral care. This highlights that the support provided for headteachers, especially during periods of ill-health absence can be poor, although headteachers may be able to access pastoral support from such organisations as their professional associations. The pastoral support for headteachers provided by sponsors is probably an aspect that hasn't had time to evolve and be worked through by academy sponsor leaders, as this is a rapidly evolving sector. The remuneration for headteachers

though does appear to be broadly consistent with the national system, although a couple of academy sponsors had chosen to use their freedom regarding leaders' pay to increase salaries, whilst two others had used these freedoms to either decrease or suppress the pay of leaders.

### **4.3 Findings from the focus group**

As stated in the methodology section, the primary evidence of the eleven academy headteachers was supplemented with interviews of five different primary academy headteachers in a focus group process (details of the participants can be located in table 3.6 in chapter 3). The focus group was presented with my key initial findings and the embryonic autonomy conceptual framework.

With regards to the contradiction that appeared in the research from headteachers stating that they had autonomy but then giving lots of examples of aspects that the sponsor controlled, one member of the focus group reached the same conclusion that I had, that there is confusion between the terms 'autonomy' and 'day-to-day-management':

'It depends what autonomy is. If autonomy is the daily operational functionality of the school setting [then] they've got autonomy within their staff body, within their parents, within their children, within their community. They have that, but then accountability comes into it from the multi-academy trust, which actually takes elements of that away.'

(Participant A in the focus group)

The first element of the quote highlights some confusion some headteachers may have in distinguishing between what is leadership and what is management, despite there being clear differences as highlighted by Davies (2009). The final part of this quote illustrates the

link that headteachers see between autonomy and accountability – the reality is that accountability can remove some degree of autonomy as headteachers are conscious of being answerable within a hierarchical model, in this instance to the sponsor.

One of the participants in the focus group questioned if headteachers within the original fieldwork had given the impression that they had autonomy as it was part of their 'professional identity':

'I think, maybe inside all of us, there is this desire to say, "absolutely, yes we can, everything's perfect, it's fine". Because that's the feeling we want to give over to someone new, isn't it? Therefore, "yes, of course, I've got complete autonomy", "yes I'm in-charge", "yes I'm doing this", because that's the public face that we always want to put out, isn't it?'

(Participant D in the focus group)

Another headteacher within the group reflected that the contradiction may be a result of headteachers feeling that they have autonomy over the aspects that are important to them. This headteacher gave the example that she knew she had to submit data to her sponsor on a regular basis but didn't care what format this was requested in by the sponsor, whereas she felt that the 'day-to-day' running was something very 'personal and something I care about' (participant B in the focus group). Participant B further reflected that being a headteacher in a sponsored MAT allows her to concentrate on the aspects she cares about:

'You know, one of the motivations of being a head in a MAT is because it's not about finance; you don't go into headship for finance, you don't go into headship for health and safety. If someone can take away the headache bit of it, you wouldn't mind the day-to-day running of it, the checking and the accountability bit to a certain extent. I think it just helps when you can get on with the teaching and learning.'

(Participant B in the focus group)

When presented with the fact that one sponsor had implemented a maths scheme across the trust and the fact that the headteacher didn't acknowledge that this was evidence of his autonomy being eroded, participant B felt that this was a result of maths not being a 'creative' subject and that maths was either 'right or wrong'.

The focus group was informed that the evidence from the research suggested that many headteachers within the study may have less autonomy than they would have had if they were leading a LA maintained school. Participant A reflected that in meetings she regularly attended in her consortium, composed of many LA headteachers, she felt they had less autonomy than she had as a sponsored primary headteacher:

'I regularly, at consortium meetings, hear my [LA colleague] headteachers feeling dis-empowered by the local authority because they go to knock on the door and there's nobody there. They may have autonomy of knocking on the door, but what can they do? Their hands are tied on budget; the budget reductions from the council are horrific. Actually, they have less [autonomy] - they have to follow all the policies and the HR and jump through all the [authority's] hoops to get anywhere.'

(Participant A in the focus group)

This reflection shows the issues that are now affecting LA headteachers – the lack of support from LAs and diminishing school budgets, bringing participant A to the conclusion that these aspects actually have an impact on headteacher autonomy. Participant A also believes that there are more policies and procedures to 'jump' through with the LA – in reality headteachers within sponsored trusts are likely to have similar policies, especially as most HR policies that are linked to terms and conditions will have been protected for staff under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 as part

of the transfer. Equally, the financial pressures that LA headteachers are facing are also likely to be an issue in the academy sector. Participant D reflecting on the comments of Participant A regarding the difference in autonomy between primary sponsored and LA headteachers commented upon the education space within which all schools have been operating over the last few years, dominated by austerity:

‘I think it comes back to what do we mean by autonomy. I can see what you’re saying about local authority schools. In some ways, they’ve not got anybody supporting them. Therefore, they can do a lot of stuff by themselves, but they don’t quite like it because there is no direction and no support [from the local authority]. Is that autonomy? Whereas we’ve [sponsored headteachers] got autonomy, but we’ve got supported autonomy. Maybe we both have autonomy, but I would hate to be out in the cold with the local authority at the moment, because there’s no support for you. Whereas within the MAT there is support for you within that autonomy...It’s a bit like the difference between delegation of responsibility and abdication of responsibility. Delegation, there’s this idea that we work at co-sorting things out. Abdication is just, “go and do it.”’

(Participant D from the focus group)

Similar to one of the interviewees in the primary phase of the fieldwork (**University Academy**), participant D used the phrase ‘supported autonomy’ to describe the type of autonomy that sponsored primary headteachers can experience. This gives the impression that it is not autonomy in its true sense as it has been limited by the sponsor, although the use of the term ‘supported’ by participant D gives the impression that this contributor saw this as a positive aspect.

The literature review highlighted that some sponsors were moving to a more ‘standardised’ approach which is likely to impact upon headteacher autonomy. Without using the term ‘standardisation’ one of the focus group headteachers (participant C) articulated how

within his small trust (four schools) other headteachers had driven an agenda to implement the same assessment system across the trust, despite his reservations. This exemplifies a conclusion reached by Greany (2018) that standardisation can occur 'organically' through professional dialogue within a trust, rather than emanating from *above* through a 'roll-out' process. In addition, participant B reflected that the lack of autonomy for some schools may be a result of the fact that headteachers have already been involved in developing shared good practice. Reflecting on her sponsor, Participant B stated that when her school joined the trust there was only a small number of schools and they were therefore able to help in the development of the trust and as a result procedures became more standardised through co-creation; headteachers joining the trust might therefore have the view that there is a focus in the trust on merely implementing consistent practices as they would not have been involved in their creation.

The headteachers in the focus group were asked to reflect on the statement by one headteacher that the government and its agencies impact on his ability to enact his vision for the school. All participants felt that the government, and especially Ofsted constrained them, with one headteacher reflecting that there are 'windows' of time when headteachers can be 'brave' and trial new initiatives (not at a time near to when the school is due to be inspected). This headteacher felt that the government agenda was not impacting on her ability to run the school as she wished, although she accepted that she did have to:

'tick boxes and we have to play a game; I believe it's *how* you play the game...You have to be brave and you have to make decisions when you've got chance and breath to be brave.' (Participant A from the focus group)

The participant did acknowledge that if her school was judged as 'requires improvement' by Ofsted or re-designated as needing support by her sponsor it would considerably impact upon her ability to enact her own vision. This therefore reinforces the view that autonomy can be contingent on context.

Discussion was then held into the vision setting in schools and who sets this. One of the participants (E), a headteacher within a faith-based multi-academy trust made the point that whilst her trust was promoting a consistent vision across its schools, this was actually only in line with the national vision set by the Church of England Education Office, and therefore should apply if they were in a MAT or not, as a 'church' school. This potentially adds to the findings of Wright (2001) regarding 'bastard leadership' to now include sponsored academy trusts and headteachers implementing the vision of the Church of England, or other faith groups.

The group was asked to reflect on the fact that the school leaders who appeared to have the least autonomy within my fieldwork were those who belonged to trusts which were led by secondary schools. This was not a surprising finding to the focus group, which comprised of primary academy headteachers only, with one stating this would be because of the 'egocentricness' (*sic*) of the MAT leader, who one participant reflected would be a dominant character. Even if the assumption of the focus group is factually incorrect, it does give an insight into how primary headteachers may feel about joining a MAT led by a secondary headteacher.



The focus group was presented with one of the initial findings from the fieldwork, that sponsors were more likely to control the assessment procedures in their schools, rather than the curriculum. The focus group felt this was a result of the accountability that sponsors were responsible for. Participant A reflected that it was easier for sponsors to compare assessment data than it was to compare curricular that served catchments in very different geographical areas. The focus group did not express concern that trusts were implementing consistent assessment systems across their schools. The use of such systems may point to a sector where comparison and performance ranking has become an embedded aspect of neo-liberal education policy.

Another one of the initial findings of my research was the fact there are now multiple players holding school leaders to account and therefore I queried with the focus group whether there was still a place for a non-educational chairs of governors to be involved in the headteacher's performance management in sponsored trusts. There was strong feeling from the group that they felt the chair of governors should be involved in the performance management process for a number of reasons:

- if the governors are going to have real ownership of the school, they need to be involved in the headteacher performance review;
- the chair has a number of roles within the school and is the headteacher's 'sounding-board' throughout the year and is therefore aware of the leader's personal issues, which the central team may not be aware of;
- the chair will be aware of complaints and commendations that may have been made during the year from parents;

- the chair is seen as having a pastoral duty of care towards the headteacher and therefore they have a role within performance management reviews of mediating any unrealistic targets set by the sponsor and acting as the headteacher's advocate.

The reflection that the chair of governors can act as the headteacher's 'advocate' is an interesting insight on behalf of a primary sponsored headteacher as it shows a potential lack of understanding. In reality, the chair of governors is appointed by the sponsor board and is their representative and not a representative / advocate of the school and school leaders. The focus group was clear that having the chair on the headteacher's review was only tenable if there was a positive relationship between the headteacher and the chair and that they had the correct skills to question effectively.

Finally, headteachers within the focus group were asked to reflect on the titles that school leaders are given, as the fieldwork had shown that some sponsors are using the titles of 'executive headteacher' and 'head of school'. Participant A was clear that a change to 'head of school' for her would be seen as a demotion and she would feel insulted, but she thought there was a difference for deputies becoming 'head of school'. In addition, participant B reflected:

'It [the role of head of school] does feel like an interim, it's almost like trying a headship out, a bit 'headship apprenticeship' sort of element. Having come into headship recently it is one of the strangest kind of preparations for a job I think you could ever think of. You spend all your time becoming an amazing teacher, leader of various structures in the school and then day one you get HR, finance, and all the other things that you just have not done.' (Participant B in the focus group)

This led participant A to state a head of school, working with an executive headteacher may give them time to develop and have a 'gradual exposure' to the role

and transition from being a deputy to headteacher. Participant D though did not like the title 'head of school' as he felt this removed 'teaching' from the title and that this should be what the role is focussed upon.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

The empirical data once coded and analysed presented a complex situation regarding the relationships that primary academy headteachers have with their sponsors – evident is that there is not a universal relationship, rather sponsors and headteachers have evolving relationships in what is a very recent and developing phenomenon. The level of autonomy delegated to headteachers within the fieldwork schools showed significant contrasts between the schools. What was not evident was the contention made by successive secretaries of state that academisation leads to increased autonomy. What was more evident was the reduction in autonomy that some headteachers were experiencing, especially some of those headteachers in trusts sponsored by secondary schools. Therefore, there was clear evidence that leadership is shared in these primary sponsored academies. The evolution of sponsors across the sector is leading to the development of new hierarchies and governance structures and as a result there are a variety of instruments being used to hold leaders to account. Despite these changes, there was very little difference in the remuneration of these academy headteachers in comparison to their LA contemporaries. What does appear embryonic is the development of effective pastoral support systems for primary academy headteachers within the study.

The research questions were developed as a mechanism for understanding the relationship between primary academy headteachers and their sponsors in England. Whilst the findings in chapter 4 are a starting point for creating this new knowledge, further examination and analysis of the data is outlined in chapter 5 which presents the findings in a more abstract manner through the development of conceptual frameworks, and in addition in chapter 6 I explore how the data expands upon the existing knowledge of the phenomenon of relationships in sponsored primary academies.

## **Chapter 5**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Evidence from the fieldwork suggests that primary headteachers in my study do not experience the phenomenon of academy sponsorship in a consistent way and therefore have varied and complex relationships with their sponsors. This chapter synthesises the findings identified in chapter 4 through discussion of the pertinent learning. This discussion leads to the development of two new conceptual frameworks; one focussed on the different levels of autonomy headteachers employed by sponsors may experience (the 'Autonomy Complexity Framework'); the second conceptual framework focuses on the variety of accountability models currently experienced by such headteachers, which impact on headteachers' perceptions of their sponsors ('models of accountability within sponsored academy trusts'). I conclude the chapter by merging the two conceptual frameworks to identify the relationship primary headteachers may have with their sponsors as viewed through the phenomenon of 'trust'.

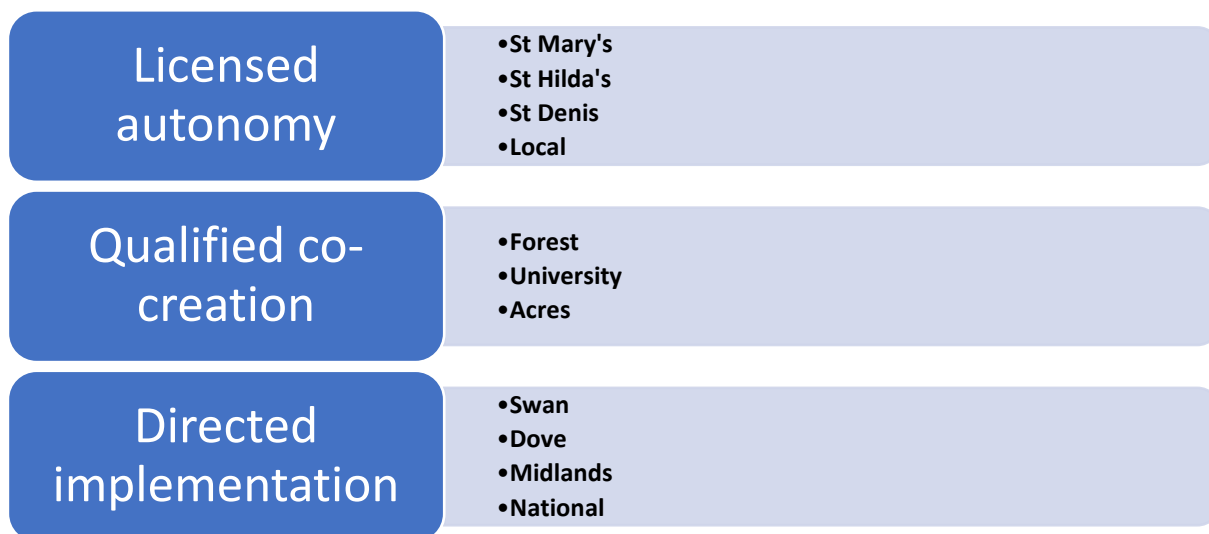
### **5.2 Conceptual framework: Autonomy Complexity Framework**

The Department for Education claimed that headteachers of academies would have more autonomy than their LA counterparts (Department for Education, 2010), yet as set-out in chapter 4, it can be seen from my fieldwork that the levels of autonomy that headteachers experience in sponsored primary academies is varied. I have therefore developed a conceptual framework related to autonomy in order to help the profession in developing

their understanding of the different types of relationships that are experienced between primary headteachers and sponsors and to help illustrate how the DFE's claim regarding the aim of academisation to delegate increased autonomy to headteachers is actually being experienced by practitioners. I refer to this framework as the Autonomy Complexity Framework.

### **Typology of relationships between headteachers and their sponsors**

As stated, the relationships between headteachers and their sponsors are complex and in reality it is difficult to categorise these into one specific typological framework, as will be discussed later; this being said, a typology can help to broadly understand the different types of relationships. For the Autonomy Complexity Framework I have developed a typology to describe the broad types of autonomy relationships that the sponsored primary academy headteachers in my study had with their sponsors: 'licensed autonomy', 'qualified co-creation' and 'directed implementation', with 'licensed autonomy' headteachers having the most autonomy within a sponsored trust setting and those experiencing 'directed implementation' having the least autonomy. Using the evidence from the interviews I have used a *best-fit* approach to position each of the headteachers against this typology as outlined in fig. 5.1 (throughout this chapter for ethical reasons, the pseudonym names of each school have been used to represent the headteacher names):



**Fig 5.1. The *best fit* relationship model**

Each of the three terms employed for my Autonomy Conceptual Framework are now explored with evidence from my findings to illustrate. As discussed in chapter 3, a summary of each headteacher's transcription was developed and these were compared and contrasted against each other in order for me to categorise the relationships and place each headteacher against the typology in my conceptual framework (see appendix A for examples of these summaries).

Relationship: ***licensed autonomy***

Relationships that are characterised by headteachers experiencing a high level of autonomy in several key aspects, such as curriculum development and assessment, can be described as experiencing a 'licensed autonomy' model. These headteachers are given a high degree of freedom to make decisions, the ability to define and deliver their own vision and values for the academy, and the power to make most financial decisions without the

approval of the sponsor. The relationship and experience they have with their sponsor appear to closely resemble the relationship between LAs and their headteachers. The key difference is that any autonomy that the headteachers have is *devolved* to them by the sponsor and can be withdrawn at any time, and therefore I have deemed this as 'licensed' autonomy, as autonomy actually rests with the trust board rather than the individual headteachers; the headteacher's autonomy is *quasi* or *constrained* as the scheme of delegation acts as a *licence* regarding what the headteacher can do without gaining permission from the sponsor.

Headteachers within the category of 'licensed autonomy' appear to have significantly more impact on developing the school than the sponsor, as evidenced from the headteacher reflections in the interviews. The fieldwork identified a number of headteachers who appeared to have a relationship with their sponsor that is similar to the one they previously would have had with the LA, in particular the headteachers of **St Mary's**, **St Hilda's** and **St Denis** academies. In these schools the sponsors (all Church of England dioceses) were having very little involvement in the day-to-day management or leadership of the school. At **St Denis Academy** the only aspects that the headteacher thought were controlled by the sponsor were the appointment of governors and financial oversight, other than that there was no additional control, as the sponsor did not have a scheme of delegation, in fact the headteacher stated:

"[The Director of Education at the diocese] is clear that you are the headteacher of this school, and it's your school."

(Headteacher of St Denis Academy)



Whilst the appointment of governors to the board of **St Denis Academy** by the sponsor could be used as a means of exerting tight control over school leaders, the interview with the headteacher did not identify this as a factor. The headteacher of **St Denis Academy** was able to use his own assessment system, implement a curriculum of his choice and select the providers for all services, with the exception of the auditors and the finance bursar service which were directed by the sponsor. Whilst there was 'oversight' of the budget, the headteacher was not being directed on how to use school funds. The majority of LA primary headteachers would have the same freedoms, but at any point the sponsor could put in place regulations to limit the autonomy of the leaders of the school. This actually occurred post my fieldwork when the sponsor of **St Denis Academy** re-designated themselves as a multi-academy trust rather than an umbrella trust and put in place a scheme of delegation. Another school that exemplified 'licensed autonomy' was **St Hilda's Academy** where there was no demonstrable change for the headteacher compared to being a LA headteacher – again she was able to establish her own curriculum and assessment systems and the sponsor appeared to be having very little 'day-to-day' management of the school. Where the sponsor had tried to align all of the schools on an aspect (all schools were requested to use one supply agency) the headteacher was able to show that she had the ability to use her autonomy to resist this as she could evidence that the quality of the new company did not reach her expectations. **St Mary's Academy** again was similar, although there was evidence that the sponsor had more control than the sponsors of **St Hilda's** and **St Denis** academies as the headteacher spoke about the sponsor taking control over building maintenance, although the headteacher was very happy to relinquish this control.

Despite the model of 'licensed autonomy' identifying the least level of control from sponsors and the most autonomy on the continuum, it is different to the model presented by Hill *et al.* (2012), where their 'light touch' model was described as 'informal collaboration' exemplified by schools within the organisation collaborating but with no shared governance or leadership structure; in the majority of schools in my study with 'licensed autonomy' there was shared governance and leadership. There is also clear distance between my model of 'licensed autonomy' and the 'autonomy' model presented by Carter (2017), as his terminology gives the impression that headteachers are totally autonomous within a multi-academy trust; as has been clearly evidenced, this is not technically possible as the agency of headteachers is at the behest of the sponsor with the sponsor framing the terms. Greany (2018) also used 'autonomy' as a term to conceptualise headteacher autonomy in MATs, but as stated in chapter 2 he was more nuanced in his use of the term than Carter (2017), referring to *aspects* of school leadership that a headteacher may have autonomy over, rather than implying as Carter (2017) did that it was the whole of their leadership. I therefore feel that there is alignment between my use of the term 'licensed autonomy' and that of 'autonomy' used by Greany (2018). The use of 'licensed autonomy' also contrasts with the term 'laissez faire' used by Gibson (2014) to identify headteachers at the extreme of his continuum. Gibson (2014) describes his 'laissez faire' category as offering, 'a high degree of autonomy and decision making, with followers gaining advice when they seek it' (p57). The terminology used by Gibson (2014) again misses the essential element identified in my research – that any autonomy is *gifted* by the sponsor to the headteacher and can be withdrawn at any point without discussion. The only school in my research that is likely to fall within the 'laissez faire' category of Gibson

(2014) is **St Denis Academy**. ‘Licensed autonomy’ also contrasts with the model of ‘paternalistic’ put forward by Greany (2018). In the model proffered by Greany (2018) senior leaders within a MAT approach their schools in a caring manner, treating them like a ‘family’ and differentiating their support based on their current needs. Whilst there were clearly examples of trusts differentiating support for their schools, this differentiation sometimes involved the sponsor restricting headteacher autonomy and therefore cannot always be seen as a positive aspect as implied by Greany (2018). What was evident from my study was that the headteachers who experienced ‘licensed autonomy’ were most likely to fall within the definition of being ‘leaders’ at their schools, rather than merely ‘managers’ (Davies, 2009).

The use of the term ‘licensed’ within my typology for this category highlights that this autonomy is at the control of the sponsor and moves the debate away from the myth of total autonomy in a sponsored / multi-academy space that is still claimed by the government (Department for Education, 2019b) and some sponsors. It is not surprising that sponsors still make reference to giving their headteachers autonomy; in a time when sponsors need to expand, in order to be financially viable, it is not a particularly marketable approach to future school headteachers and governors to state that their autonomy may be substantially diminished.

Relationship: ***qualified co-creation***

In the model of ‘qualified co-creation’ the headteacher and the sponsor are largely working in partnership to improve the education of pupils; the relationship is mutually respectful.

The sponsor and the headteacher work collaboratively, but this co-creation model is 'qualified' as the power relationship is not equal, as the sponsor determines the relationship that is in place and can move towards either of the two other models in the Autonomy Complexity Framework at any time without consultation or agreement from the headteacher. The sponsor is developing initiatives and policies for either individual schools or across all of its schools. Co-creation is 'qualified' as the headteacher's power to innovate remains controlled by the sponsor, with headteachers often needing to gain permission from the sponsor before implementing their own initiatives, or there is a perceived 'threat' hanging over headteachers if they don't consult with the sponsor.

The clearest example of a 'qualified co-creation' relationship was observed between the headteacher of **Forest Academy** and her sponsor (the local secondary school). As there were only two schools in the MAT it could be claimed that it is easier for such a relationship to evolve than within a very large MAT. This being said, it would equally be as easy with just one sponsored school for leaders of the secondary school to run the sponsored school directly, especially as in this instance the schools share a site; therefore, either consciously or unconsciously the relationship has developed into a broadly qualified co-creation model. The headteacher clearly felt that the sponsor was working in partnership with school leaders, illustrated for the headteacher through twice weekly meetings where the headteacher could 'add items to the agenda'. She also stated that the sponsor had 'allowed' school leaders to put in place the assessment system of their choice, although she had to justify what the *benefits* of that system were. This was a similar situation with

the curriculum; when school leaders looked to purchase a commercial scheme, they did this 'in consultation' with the sponsor and stated that it was not 'done to them'. Whilst **Forest Academy** *best fits* into this model, there are aspects where there are some tensions with the model descriptor, the most notable being that the sponsor has no primary experience and is consequently reliant on external support, therefore there are limits to the sponsor's ability to 'co-create' as a result of this lack of expertise.

An example of how sponsors *qualify* the co-creation model was also seen at **Acres Academy** where the sponsor *allowed* headteachers to undertake *risks* but set this within the parameters of having to justify their pupil outcomes if their proposed initiative led to a decline in results. This implies a threat to headteachers that there could be consequences, perhaps personally, if they were to independently implement an approach and then this did not succeed. The headteacher though felt the sponsor was able to provide the school with the support they needed, including from designated subject leaders from within the central team - this helped to support inexperienced leaders in the school. Whilst 'qualified co-creation' is the *best-fit* for **Acres Academy** there are elements of leadership that are directed across the sponsor trust, including a universal assessment system; as a result this school is towards 'directed implementation' on the Autonomy Complexity Framework rather than being closer to 'licensed autonomy'.

The relationship described by the headteacher of **University Academy** could also be classified as 'qualified co-creation'. The school leaders had been allowed to put in place a curriculum of their choosing as long as it met the MAT's criteria of providing the pupils with

a broad and balanced curriculum. This can be seen to be ‘qualified co-creation’ in practice with the sponsor setting the guiding principles and then the school using its delegated autonomy to put in place a system that meets the school’s needs whilst fulfilling the sponsor’s criteria.

In comparing my category of ‘qualified co-creation’ to the findings of Hill *et al.* (2012) it can be seen that there is no comparative category within their framework, given that their spectrum concentrates substantially on structures rather than processes and relationships. The ‘transparent’ model in Greany (2018) can be likened to the ‘qualified co-creators’ model that I proffer – in his research he sees this model as being about ‘co-designing’ based on a set of values. Whilst clearly the terminology of Greany (2018) resonates with mine regarding co-design I feel that my categorisation goes much further than he suggests; in his model it appears that headteachers are being encouraged to participate in the decision making related to the *trust’s* development, policy formulation and approaches. There was little evidence of such dialogue occurring in the sponsored trusts I examined. What I contend is that these trusts were having a significant impact on the development of policy and approaches within their *schools*, rather than just headteachers impacting on *trust* development. What was seen in the schools in this category was MATs taking different approaches school improvement. For example, the MAT which **University** belonged to took an earned autonomy approach whilst the sponsor of **Forest** academy used a school-to-school support approach and **Acres** academy’s MAT used both school-to-school support and a centralised approach – this variation in approaches concurs with Greany (2018).

Greany (2018) also refers to some practices being 'aligned', akin to the definition employed by Carter (2017). The 'aligned' model of Greany (2018) is defined as 'an agreed approach that is widely adopted, but on a 'voluntary basis', with aspects becoming aligned as a result of headteachers working together and sharing best practice, described by one of his participants as 'behaviour mimicking' and another describing alignment as, 'a consequence of professional dialogue' (p89). Whilst there are similarities with the 'aligned' model of Greany (2018) and my terminology, it is questionable from my evidence as to how 'voluntary' the adoption of some of the procedures are. The 'aligned' model presented by Carter (2017) does not give any indication that implementation of practice is 'voluntary' unlike Greany (2018). In my 'qualified co-creator' model the power of the sponsor goes beyond that suggested by Greany (2018) and Carter (2017) and more to the root of the type of education that the school is providing, through co-creation of such elements as the school's curriculum. Greany (2018) identified that practices across the MAT can be developed through one of three approaches; co-design; organically; or rolled-out. In my research there was very little evidence of schools being involved in co-creating MAT wide approaches; the only example was in St Hilda's MAT where the headteacher was involved with a group of the headteachers in the MAT in co-designing and delivering a programme for newly qualified teachers. What was most seen across my study was the 'rolling-out' of initiatives by the sponsor.

Gibson (2014) employed the term 'democratic' to conceptualise a type of relationship secondary academy sponsored headteachers have with their sponsors that are mid-way along his continuum. His 'democratic' style identifies school leaders and sponsors who,

‘share decisions through discussion and promote members of the group to enable them to participate in the decision-making process’ (p57). The headteachers within my research sample experiencing ‘qualified co-creation’ do not possess a relationship with their sponsors that can be defined as ‘democratic’ and the hierarchies that many of them experience certainly do not point towards an *egalitarian* system as CEOs and other Senior Management Executive are line managers to the headteachers, and not their equals, as they would be in many federations of schools. The idea that headteachers in the mid-range of the autonomy continuum agree to aspects ‘voluntarily’ and through ‘democratic’ methods of decision making would be disingenuous as there is an element of imposition on schools in some aspects – and it is the imposition which separates those schools with ‘licensed autonomy’ to those with ‘qualified co-creation’. Whilst therefore leaders in ‘qualified co-creation’ are able to demonstrate leadership in their schools (Davies, 2009) there is also more imposition on them to administer procedures of the sponsor and they therefore have more managerial roles than their ‘qualified autonomy’ contemporaries.

Relationship: ***directed implementation***

In this model, the headteacher may frame their relationship as being merely an employee of the sponsor, with their role dominated by managerial aspects, as their core duties are to implement the directions of the sponsor. The sponsor in this model has significantly more impact on developing the school than in the previous two models, and consequently it is difficult to see the individual academies as examples of ‘site-based management’, in fact such leaders may have less autonomy than both their LA counterparts and



headteachers in other academy trusts, and are far removed from the model originally promoted by the DFE for autonomous headteachers (Department for Education, 2010).

The school where a 'directed implementation' relationship appeared to be most evident was at the **Swan Academy**. Within the empirical data it was clear from the evidence presented by the headteacher of **Swan Academy** that he was a possible outlier, but his inclusion has allowed the researcher to gain a full picture of the relationships that can occur between a headteacher and their sponsors. At the **Swan Academy** the control by the sponsor extended to the purchasing power of the headteacher and the type and frequency of pupil assessments. 'Directed implementation' also describes the model articulated by the headteachers at **Midlands Academy**, **National Academy** and **Dove Academy**. At the **Midlands Academy** the headteacher was able to identify a raft of elements that the sponsor controlled – including a preferred style of teaching and learning, which was regularly monitored to ensure compliance by the Director of Education through quality controlling aspects of the headteacher's monitoring – an aspect that the headteacher resented. In addition, the sponsor implemented a MAT wide assessment system across all its schools – a system that the headteacher initially opposed. The headteacher also felt frustrated at not being able to renovate his Early Years area through the purchase of resources without gaining permission from the sponsor despite the school having large financial reserves. The approach from the **Midlands Academy** MAT was encapsulated in a statement from the Director of Education relayed by the headteacher, 'this is how it's done; if you don't like it, move.' Whilst there was a high degree of control at the **Midlands Academy**, the headteacher, as an inexperienced school leader was grateful for the

oversight that he received – referring to it as a ‘security blanket’. The headteacher of **National Academy** can also be seen to align with ‘directed implementation’ as he had an assessment system imposed upon him by the sponsor and the sponsor had implemented a universal approach to the teaching of maths across all of its schools.

Whilst there appears to be a link between my ‘directed implementation’ model and the ‘standardised’ model identified by Carter (2017), the vision presented by Carter (2017) is not as draconian as some of the examples identified in my research (in particular at **Swan Academy** and **Midlands Academy**) as Carter (2017) refers to the concept as being related to standardisation of back office systems, finance systems and governance and what he describes as ‘modest use of standardization...for educational delivery’; at **Swan Academy** and **Midlands Academy** the ‘standardisation’ by these trusts goes much further than this. Whereas there is a correlation between the categorisation of Greany (2018) of sponsors as ‘directive’ and my typology of ‘directed implementation.’ This is exemplified in Greany (2018) by one of his CEOs articulating the relationship with his headteachers as being framed by a ‘non-negotiable culture and non-excuse culture’ (p61). In these schools the approach to school support mainly falls within the ‘centralised’ approach identified by Greany (2018) and processes are definitely ‘rolled-out’ rather than forming organically amongst headteachers or being co-created (Greany, 2018). Gibson (2014) highlighted sponsors at the extreme of his continuum which he conceptualised as having an ‘autocratic’ relationship with their headteachers, described as ‘keeping control over followers by ensuring that they have regulation on policies and procedures of the organisation’ (p57). Whilst the headteacher of **Swan Academy** is likely to agree with this

statement, this description is unlikely to resonate with the headteachers of **Midlands** and **National** academies as autocratic leaders are usually associated with those who do not take into account the wishes and thoughts of others which they would not concur with. In the model presented by Hill *et al.* (2012), the 'tight' model of partnership working that they identified is categorised as 'the pedagogical chain', characterised by aspects of the curriculum being directed by the sponsor. What is clear from my fieldwork is that the conceptualisation presented by Hill *et al.* (2012) of this group of headteacher is limiting as it has been found that the control of the sponsor extends far beyond the content of the curriculum to include control of a raft of other aspects including the finances and buildings.

### **5.3 Placing the headteachers in this study against the autonomy typology of the Autonomy Complexity Framework**

In order to better understand the relationships identified within my research as observed through the lens of autonomy, three heuristic devices have been employed to give more meaning to the typology I have presented in the above section:

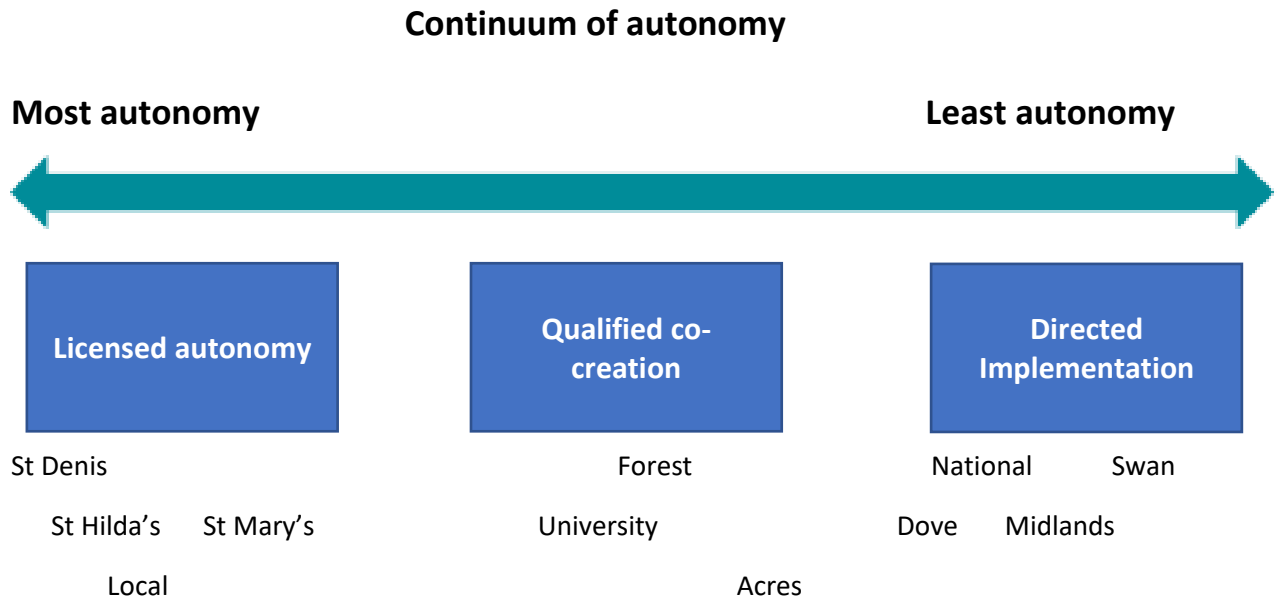
1. A *best-fit* model, which ascribes headteachers to the category that most closely describes their relationship with the sponsor;
2. A *linear* approach, with the headteachers placed along what could be seen as a *continuum* regarding the level of autonomy sponsors delegate to their headteachers;
3. A *Venn diagram* representation, in order to examine which aspects of the headteacher relationship with the sponsor fall into each of the three categories.

### The *best-fit* heuristic device

A *best-fit* model accepts that the placement of a headteacher into a category might not accurately describe their relationship with their sponsor, but it is the closest representation. As outlined in chapter 3, each headteacher's evidence was summarised and they were then placed into the *best fit* model, as presented earlier in this chapter in fig 5.1. Whilst this representation helps in our understanding of the relationships it does not capture effectively the variations in relationships that are occurring, as a result more nuanced findings can be identified through the use of other heuristic devices, such as a linear model and Venn diagrams. The linear or continuum model allows us to show distance between the headteacher perceptions of their experiences and the Venn model enables us to explore overlaps of experiences.

### Linear / continuum model heuristic device

The three categories identified as part of the conceptual framework typology can be seen as intersecting a continuum of autonomy that sponsors delegate to their headteachers, with those *granted* 'licensed autonomy', and therefore with the most autonomy, towards the high end of the continuum and those who experience 'directed implementation', with the least level of autonomy at the other extreme. Again, using the evidence from the interviews, I have placed each headteachers on this linear model (fig. 5.2).



**Fig. 5.2 Linear model representation of headteacher / sponsor relationships**

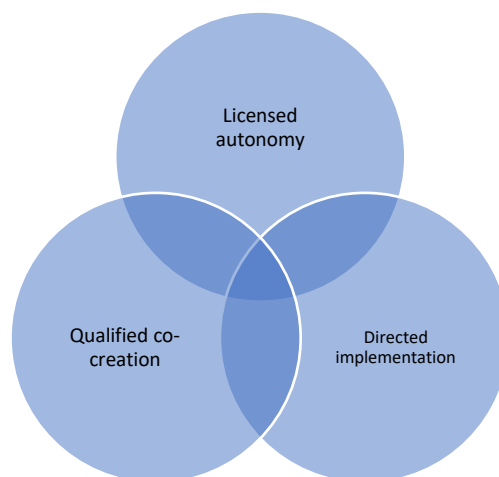
As can be seen in fig.5.2, the linear model is a refinement of the *best fit* model as it allows distance to be established between headteachers rather than the *best-fit* model which implies the autonomy levels for each headteacher in a specific group are the same. The linear model is used as an illustrative mechanism to bring meaning to the text, in no way are the distances between headteachers on the linear model to scale. The distance between participants was established after a detailed analysis of the data from each headteacher. Once I had summarised individual interviews I undertook a comparative exercise of examining each transcript against the others and then placing it on the continuum – this exercise was repeated twice, once to compare autonomy for each of the leaders and then against the accountability measures that they experienced (which will be discussed in section 5.4). In the first iteration of this exercise it was relatively easy to provide a high level placement of headteachers on the continuum. In subsequent iterations I directly compared headteachers that had been given a similar allocation; this provided a

more *fine-grained* analysis and therefore allowed me to distinguish between headteachers that appeared to share many similarities and position them on the continuum. Such a process inevitably involves judgement and interpretation, therefore the continuum of autonomy graphic serves to *illustrate* rather than *measure*. However, I believe the process of data analysis undertaken makes this a useful contribution underpinned by a systematic analysis of the data. This process also exemplifies the recommendations of Cadwell (2016) as cited in Salokangas and Ainscow (2018) who suggested moving away from the term autonomous public schools and instead commended observing these schools as either having relatively high or relatively low levels of autonomy delegated to them by the government.

#### Venn diagram as a heuristic device

A potentially more helpful device to understand the relationships that headteachers have with their sponsors is not to see these relationships as *set*, as with the simple *best-fit* model, or *linear* on a continuum of autonomy, but rather to see these relationships as interchangeable depending upon the aspect of school leadership that is being discussed. As a result, primary sponsored headteachers may have a relationship with their sponsor that in some aspects allows them 'licensed autonomy', whereas in other elements of their relationship the headteacher and sponsor are working closely together in a 'qualified co-creation' role; equally, there may be times when the sponsor is very directional and their relationship then appears more akin to 'directed implementation' for the headteacher. This approach resonated with the findings of Greany (2018) who concluded that a 'hybrid' model was often in place in academies with sponsors differentiating their approach

dependant on the context / issue. Consequently, in some aspects of their role headteachers may be able to demonstrate that they are leaders, whilst in other areas they are more managers – this may therefore account for some of the confusion in the interviews where headteachers clearly articulated autonomy but then the evidence presented showed they were often undertaking managerial roles on behalf of the sponsor. As a result, I believe my Autonomy Conceptual Framework is best illustrated through a Venn diagram mechanism as this allows for all possible logical relations between the sponsor and headteacher to be captured (see fig.5.3).

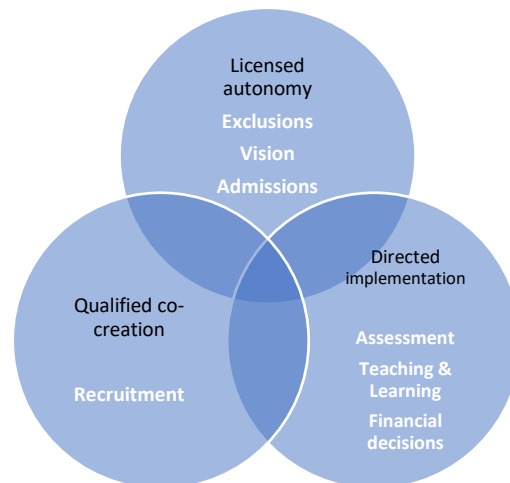


**Figure: 5.3 Venn representation of headteacher / sponsor relationships**

The Venn diagram representation helps develop our understanding of the Autonomy Complexity Framework as it shows that in addition to relationships being described as licensed autonomy, qualified co-creation and directed implementation there are also four intersections, such as relationships that can be described as ‘licensed autonomy with qualified co-creation’; this representation therefore creates at least seven different types of relationship. In my findings I could find examples of sponsors operating in all three main

relationship types in some aspects of their relationship with their headteachers – therefore all eleven schools in my primary phase of data collection fall within the intersections of all three (within the Reuleaux triangle).

In order to illustrate how the Venn approach can represent such relationships I have set out the relationship experienced by the headteacher of **Midlands Academy** (fig. 5.4) as a means of conveying the complexity of relationships that a headteacher might have with their sponsor:



**Fig 5.4. Venn representation of the relationship between the Midlands Academy headteacher and his sponsor**

In fig. 5.4 the headteacher can be seen to have this complex relationship; his sponsor has delegated the responsibility to implement his own vision for the school and asserts no control over admissions or exclusions (akin to a ‘licensed autonomy’ model); but the sponsor is having significant input into the recruitment of staff in a more ‘qualified co-creation’ model. Whereas the headteacher had no control or voice in regard to the establishment of a new assessment system in his school and was highly directed on the



teaching and learning in the school and the use of delegated funds (therefore resembling a 'directed implementation' model).

It should be noted that an individual headteacher's experience and relationship with their sponsor does not necessarily imply that all headteachers within the trust have the same relationship as there was evidence that headteachers within the same trust were treated differently by the sponsor, for example within the Midlands Academy's trust some headteachers were allowed to use their own assessment systems because they were graded as 'good' by Ofsted, whereas other schools were not. There was also evidence in St Hilda's MAT of the sponsor managing its schools in different ways, for example some headteachers in the MAT had executive headteachers above them whilst others did not and therefore there were different levels of autonomy for headteachers within that trust.

In order to better understand the conceptual framework developed in this chapter, the data was interrogated to identify if there are factors which may affect the type of relationship headteachers have with their sponsors as Greany (2018) identified that sponsor age, size, model of the MAT, context, composition, phase and beliefs of the founding leaders of a MAT were all factors in the structures and approaches to school improvement taken by the sponsor; Bernardinelli *et al.* (2018) also identified a potential link between the size of a MAT and its performance. Therefore, the data was revisited to examine the type of sponsor, the number of schools within the trust and the length of time the school had been a member of the trust to see if any of these factors appear to impact upon the relationship. This identified that headteachers in my study that have a

relationship with their sponsor that is categorised mainly by 'licensed autonomy' elements are more likely to be sponsored by a diocese, have a small number of schools in their MAT or be a school which has only recently joined the trust. Whereas, the relationship is more likely to be framed by significant 'directed implementation' elements if the school is part of a large sponsor, a national or school-led sponsor, or has been with the trust for a considerable amount of time. Further research is needed to discover if my findings are generalisable and if so, what the reasons for these are. From the interviews, my hypothesis would be as follows:

*Licensed autonomy*

*Schools in a diocesan MAT:* These have been established primarily as a means of retaining the schools within a Christian organisation and therefore this may be the primary motive rather than asserting centralised leadership and control.

*Small MATs:* This may be associated with how the schools initially joined together e.g. what is often referred to as 'mates-MATs' – groups of schools who form together to establish a MAT to protect them from what they perceive to be predatory larger MATs.

*Recently joined a MAT:* The evidence from the headteachers and Hill *et al.* (2012) shows that relationships can change between schools and their sponsor. Schools that have just joined a sponsor may be left alone initially before the MAT increases control later. As previously mentioned, it would not be a good selling point to join a MAT if the sponsor stated they would reduce school leaders' autonomy.

### *Directed implementation*

As stated, the evidence from my fieldwork suggested directed implementation was more likely to be seen in larger and national sponsors and school-led sponsors, reasons for this could be:

#### *Larger and national sponsors:*

I hypothesise that these may both exhibit more control of their schools in order for the CEO (and other executives) to have more impact on their schools through standardisation.

*School-led sponsors:* There could be a number of factors at play here as to why school-led sponsors in my study were more likely to have operate a directed implementation model.

It could be that if the trust is led by a secondary school and the majority of its schools are its feeder primary schools then the central team may be trying to create a more homogenous intake of pupils to aid pupil transition and progress. Equally, it could be by virtue of the CEO being a recent headteacher of the lead school and they have not transitioned from being a direct school leader focussed on leadership and operational matters to a more strategic role as CEO.

I believe that my Autonomy Complexity Framework, as illustrated through a Venn diagram representation allows answers to be formed to my research questions, as will be set out in Chapter 6. The conceptual framework, combined with the other findings in chapter 4 has allowed me to reflect on some of the key concepts explored in the literature review and bring meaning to this literature in the context of sponsored primary academy

headteachers. In particular there is little evidence to support the government's claim that academies provide headteachers with increased autonomy in this sector. If decentralisation of education practice has occurred this appears to have shifted from one middle-tier organisation (local authorities) to another (academy sponsors). In the majority of cases therefore there is little evidence from my study that primary sponsored academisation has allowed an increase in site-based management for these schools. The research has also highlighted that in primary sponsored academies what can be seen is a range of headteachers – some who are allowed to practice leadership whereas others have had their leadership restricted and are more involved in managerial tasks on behalf of the sponsor.

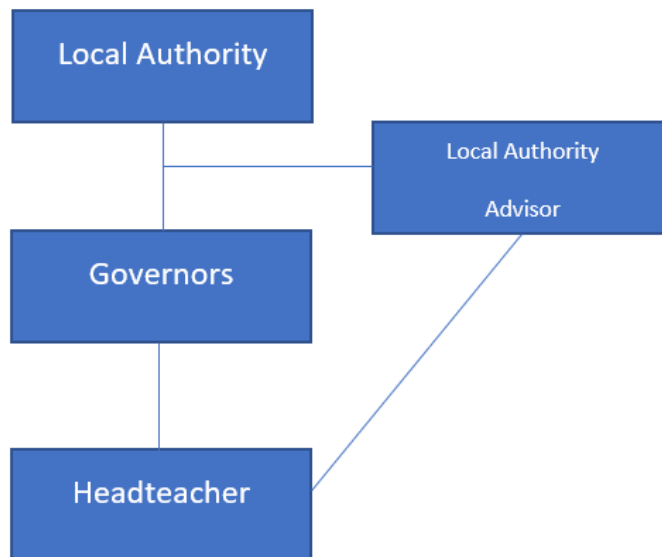
#### **5.4 Conceptual framework: Models of accountability within sponsored academy trusts**

In order to support in developing our understanding of the central aim of this research, namely to understand the relationships primary headteachers have with their sponsored academy trusts in England, it is important to determine the accountability arrangements that the headteachers experience, including who it is that holds school leaders to account. The fieldwork has shown that there are many *players* within the sponsored sector that impact on the headteacher, some by holding leaders to account whilst others support, or they combine these roles. These *players* include:

- Chairs of governors and other governors
- Chairs of sponsor and sponsor trustees
- Chief Executive Officers
- Directors of education

- Regional directors
- Sponsor appointed advisors
- Stakeholder consultative group members (used by some trusts where the governing body has been removed; these are often parent consultative groups)

These different players act within an accountability space of which the *typical* model could be described as the one experienced by headteachers within the LA maintained sector, which is illustrated in fig.5.5.



**Figure 5.5: The *typical* accountability model in local authority maintained schools**

In the *typical* accountability model shown in fig. 5.5 there is no direct line-management of the headteacher by the LA advisor or the corporate LA body, with the governing body acting as the only body holding the headteacher to account; this is a very flat accountability structure. This contrasts significantly to all of the experiences examined in my study, with the exception of **St Denis Academy** where there are similarities. I have therefore conceptualised the different models of accountability observed in my fieldwork that

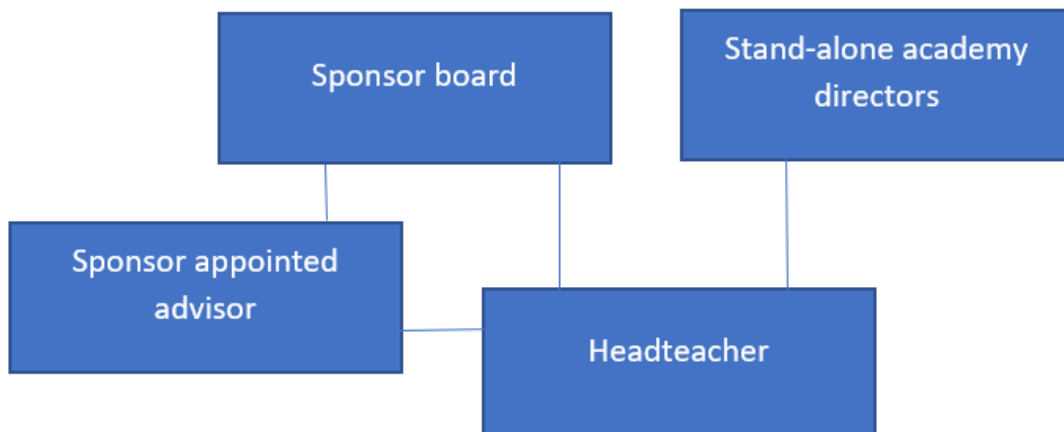
compare and contrast to the *typical* model identified in fig.5.5 into a typology outlined in table 5.1:

Models of accountability within sponsored trusts
Flat non-executive accountability
Flat executive accountability
Extended accountability
Multi-layer senior management executive accountability

**Table 5.1: Models of accountability within sponsored trusts – the typology employed within the conceptual framework**

I will now outline the typology used within the conceptual framework in more detail and the models will be discussed with evidence presented from my fieldwork to illustrate.

Flat non-executive accountability model

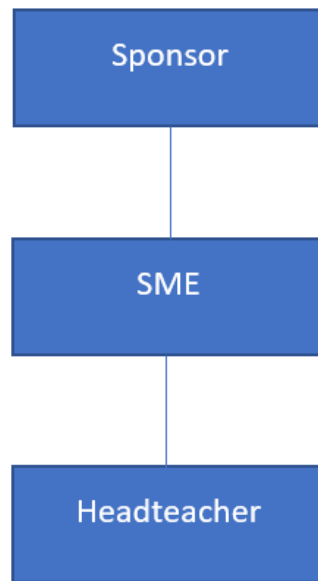


**Fig. 5.6 The ‘flat non-executive accountability model’ observed in sponsored academy trusts**

Fig.5.6 captures the structure observed at **St Denis Academy** which has been categorised for this research as a 'flat non-executive accountability model'; **St Denis** was the only academy where this was observed, and the school could therefore be classed as an *outlier*. In this model, both the sponsor and the stand-alone academy board of trustees have authority over the headteacher as both hold the headteacher to account. Although the sponsor (as an umbrella trust) cannot directly dismiss the headteacher they could achieve this through influencing and advising the stand-alone company trustees and if this does not work they could use their powers as *members* and remove the trustees and replace them with other trustees with the remit of undertaking the dismissal of the headteacher. The sponsor holds the headteacher to account through termly meetings where the headteacher has to present information on the school's performance and is questioned by sponsor members. The stand-alone academy board of trustees hold the headteacher to account through performance management systems and regular governing body meetings. This therefore shows a slight contrast to the *typical* model in fig. 5.5 as LAs only have influence over governing bodies and no direct power, whereas the sponsor does have greater influence. In addition, the sponsor has an advisor to support the school, although this advisor has no direct agency over the headteacher.

#### Flat executive accountability model

The second accountability model can be classified as the 'flat executive accountability model' as observed at **Forest Academy** and **Swan Academy** (illustrated in fig. 5.7):



**Fig. 5.7 The ‘flat executive accountability model’ observed in sponsored academy trusts**

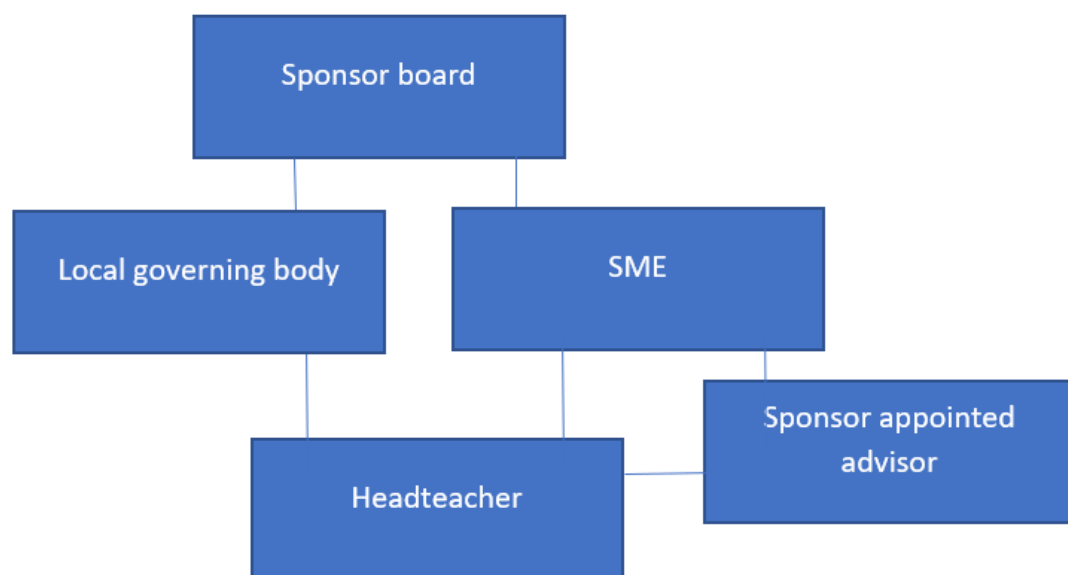
The ‘flat-executive accountability model’ is the simplest structure observed and is only likely to be less hierarchical in the English school system in a stand-alone non-sponsored academy, as in those schools the headteacher would be directly accountable to the trustees. In the flat executive accountability model, the SME holds the headteacher to account and the SME is held to account by the sponsor trustees; in this model there is no local governing body. This model is probably most likely where schools are geographically close together and where there is a shared community / stakeholders. In the model observed at **Forest Academy** the sponsor had not appointed an advisor to support / challenge the school leaders and therefore this was undertaken directly by the SME (joint CEOs in this case). At **Swan Academy** the governing body had been removed and the CEO and central staff had taken over the role previously undertaken by governors. Despite both these headteachers experiencing the same model of accountability structure this does not



imply that both had the same levels of accountability (as will be shown in fig. 5.10) as there was clear difference between the two with the headteacher of **Swan Academy** experiencing higher levels of accountability than the headteacher of **Forest Academy**. Such accountability measures included the school having to submit weekly pupil assessments to the sponsor, mock Ofsted inspections and the headteacher having to account for his pupils' attainment in front of his colleague headteachers.

### Extended accountability model

The third model of accountability observed in my research is represented in fig. 5.8 (the 'extended accountability model').



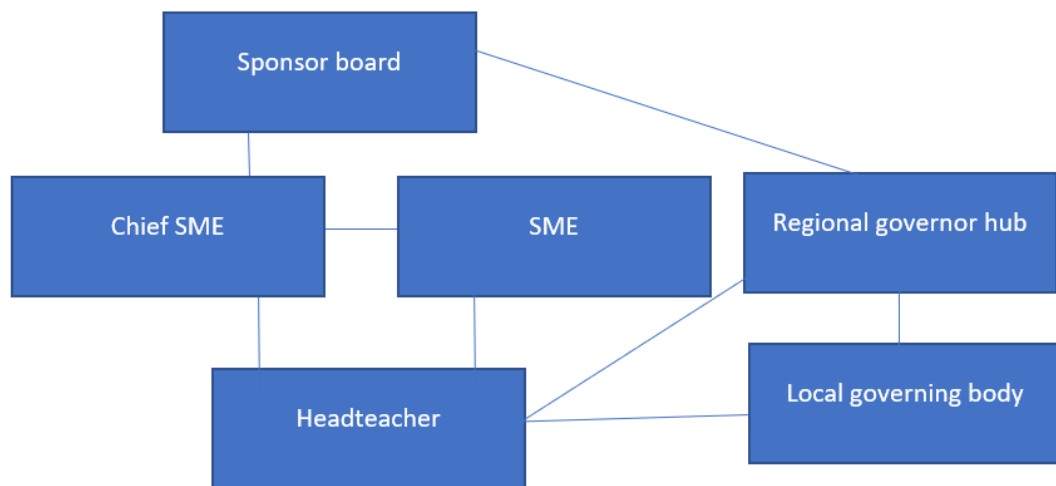
**Fig. 5.8 The 'extended accountability model' observed in sponsored academy trusts**

In the 'extended accountability model' the headteacher is held to account by the SME, who in turn is held to account by the sponsor trustees; the headteacher is also held to account by their own local governing body, who in-turn reports to the sponsor board. In addition,

the sponsor appoints an advisor to support and challenge school leaders, although they do not have direct power over school leaders. The ‘extended accountability model’ was observed in my research at **St. Hilda’s, St. Mary’s, University**, and **Local** academies; as will be seen in Fig. 5.10 all of these headteachers experienced relatively low levels of accountability.

Multi-layer senior management executive accountability model

The models examined above contrast greatly to the final model, which I have conceptualised as ‘multi-layer senior management executive accountability’ as there are a number of SMEs involved in holding individual headteachers to account, illustrated in fig. 5.9.



**Fig. 5.9 The ‘multi-layer senior management executive accountability model’ observed in sponsored academy trusts**

In the 'multi-layer senior management executive model' the headteacher is accountable to the chief SME (for example the CEO, who will be the accounting officer for the organisation) and 'other SME' players (for example 'regional director', 'director of education' or 'executive headteacher'). In addition, in such models there is likely to be either a local governing body or stakeholder consultative group that acts either as *influencers* or with *agency* over the headteacher. On occasions, there is also a regional or 'hub' governing body (as at **Midlands** academy). The 'multi-layer senior management executive accountability model' was observed at a number of academies within my study (**Dove, Midlands, Acres** and **National** academies), two of which were 'national' chains.

What was evident from the fieldwork is that sponsored trusts do not necessarily have one accountability model that they use consistently across their schools. For example, the headteacher of **St. Hilda's Academy** highlighted that although she did not have an executive headteacher that she was responsible to, other headteachers within the trust did have that model, therefore headteachers in the same trust may experience different forms of accountability.

In order to identify if there were patterns to the different models of accountability observed and the types of sponsored schools in my study I examined the model of accountability compared to the sponsorship type in place (outlined in table 5.2). As can be seen from table 5.2 there does not appear to be any direct correlation between the accountability model deployed by a trust and the type of sponsor that they are, with the exception of the national chains within my study who were all using a 'multi-layer senior

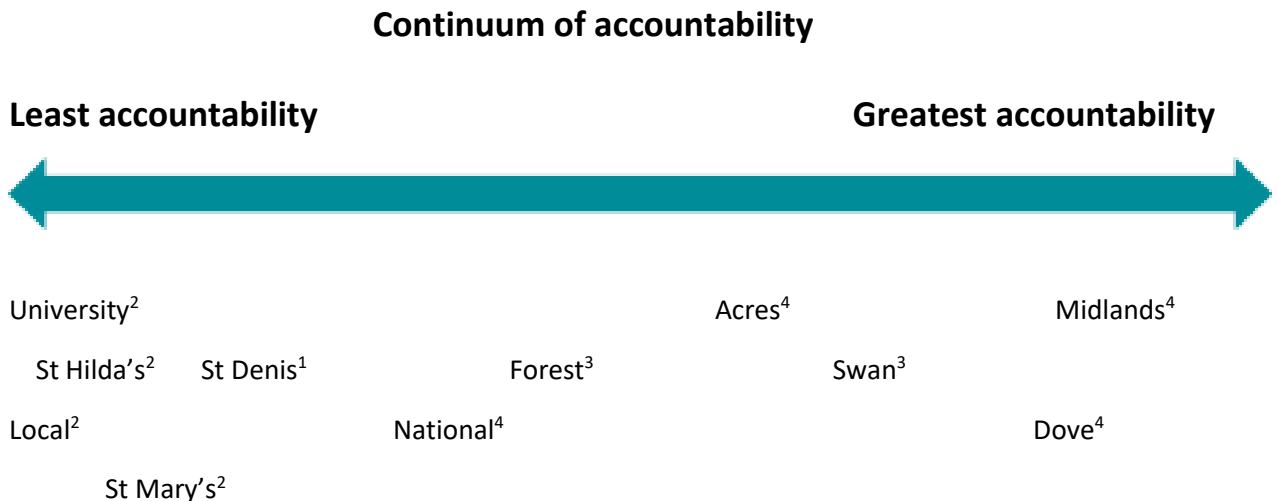
management executive accountability' model; this is likely to be as a result of them being large organisations and needing to have more staff involved to manage the organisation, although as was shown in chapter 4, this can lead to duplication of accountability for the headteachers.

<b>Academy</b>	<b>Sponsor type</b>	<b>Accountability model</b>
<b>Acres</b>	National chain	Multi-layer SME
<b>Dove</b>	National chain	Multi-layer SME
<b>Forest</b>	School-led	Flat executive
<b>Local</b>	School-led	Extended
<b>Midlands</b>	School-led	Multi-layer SME
<b>National</b>	National chain	Multi-layer SME
<b>St Denis</b>	Faith	Flat non-executive
<b>St. Hilda's</b>	Faith	Extended
<b>St. Mary's</b>	Faith	Extended
<b>Swan</b>	School-led	Flat executive
<b>University</b>	University-led	Extended

**Table 5.2 Categorisation of schools by accountability models and sponsorship type**

The players and hierarchical structures identified in my research have an impact on headteachers in numerous ways, but most importantly by holding them to account; my fieldwork highlighted that the levels of accountability varied considerably between the sponsors. School leaders within the same typology descriptor also had varying degrees of accountability and therefore the structure in place to hold leaders to account did not necessarily always equate to the same levels of accountability for those headteachers. The headteachers have therefore been plotted on another continuum, this time in relation to their perceptions of the level of accountability that they experience (fig. 5.10). As with the methodology for the autonomy continuum, the method for placing the sponsors and headteachers on the accountability continuum was reached through summarising the accountability and hierarchical systems in operation in each of the schools examined and

then comparing and contrasting them – examples of these summaries can be located in appendix A.



Key: 1 = flat non-executive. 2 = extended. 3 = flat executive. 4 = multi-layer SME

**Fig. 5.10 Accountability continuum**

As figure 5.10 demonstrates, the perceived levels of accountability experienced by headteachers in my study traverses from that seen at the **Local, University** and **St Hilda's** academies where the headteachers are experiencing very few mechanisms to hold them to account and therefore can be described as having relatively low levels of accountability, through to the high accountability experienced by the headteacher of **Midlands Academy** who is held to account by the Director of Education, the CEO, local governors, and hub governors through multiple mechanisms. The continuum highlights that the sponsors in this study which operate either a flat non-executive accountability or extended accountability models are the ones where the headteacher has the least level of accountability. Whereas, in trusts that operate a multi-layer SME accountability model the headteachers are likely to experience some of the greatest levels of accountability.

The development of the ‘models of accountability within sponsored academy trusts’ as a conceptual framework has allowed me to develop an understanding towards my final research question:

- How do primary headteachers in sponsored academies perceive their relationship with their sponsor?

A detail response to the question will be set out in chapter 6. I believe that my ‘models of accountability within sponsored academy trusts’ has added to what is currently a paucity of research into this area in relation to primary sponsored primary academies. The conceptualisation of headteacher accountability has helped to identify the different players who are holding headteachers to account and gives us an insight into some of the mechanism used in accountability of leaders and further supports the findings of Greany (2018). What is clear from the models identified is that there does not appear to be an increase in local community accountability in processes, which Leithwood and Menzies (1998) claimed site-based management could lead to. In fact, in three of the schools in the study (**Forest**, **National** and **Swan** academies) the sponsor had actually removed their governing bodies and therefore in these communities there is potentially less community accountability than when the school was maintained by the LA. There was equally no evidence of community accountability measures aligned to that proffered by Ehren and Perryman (2018) being used by any of the sponsors in my study. Ehren and Perryman (2018) identified such indicators of community accountability as being employment rates, crime statistics and community cohesion – these though may not be credible accountability measures for schools within my study as they were all primary schools and therefore they would be less directly in control of such variables. There were though examples of other

accountability measures being used by sponsors that would fall within their *individual*, *organisational* and *network* categories, giving more evidence to support the findings of Ehren and Perryman (2018).

What is evident from my fieldwork is that a number of the headteachers may be able to resonate with the comment of Hopmann (2008) regarding the education sector now being in the 'age of accountability', especially for those headteachers experiencing 'multi-layer senior management executive accountability'.

### **5.5 Examining the relationships between primary headteachers and sponsors as viewed through both lenses of autonomy and accountability**

Although there are a few differences between the placement of headteachers on the accountability continuum (fig. 5.10) compared to the autonomy continuum (fig. 5.2), it is evident that the relationship the headteachers perceive to have regarding their level of autonomy generally correlates to the level of accountability they perceive to experience. Therefore, those headteachers with the most autonomy are also likely to have the least accountability, whilst those with the least level of autonomy are more likely to have increased accountability. The combination of accountability and autonomy within the relationship between headteachers and their sponsors could be conceptualised as the level of *trust* that headteachers experience. I contend that within the primary sponsored academy sector the headteacher's experience of *trust* is highly predicated on the relationship that the headteacher has with their sponsor regarding accountability and autonomy. The matrix in fig. 5.11 combines the illustrative representations of the

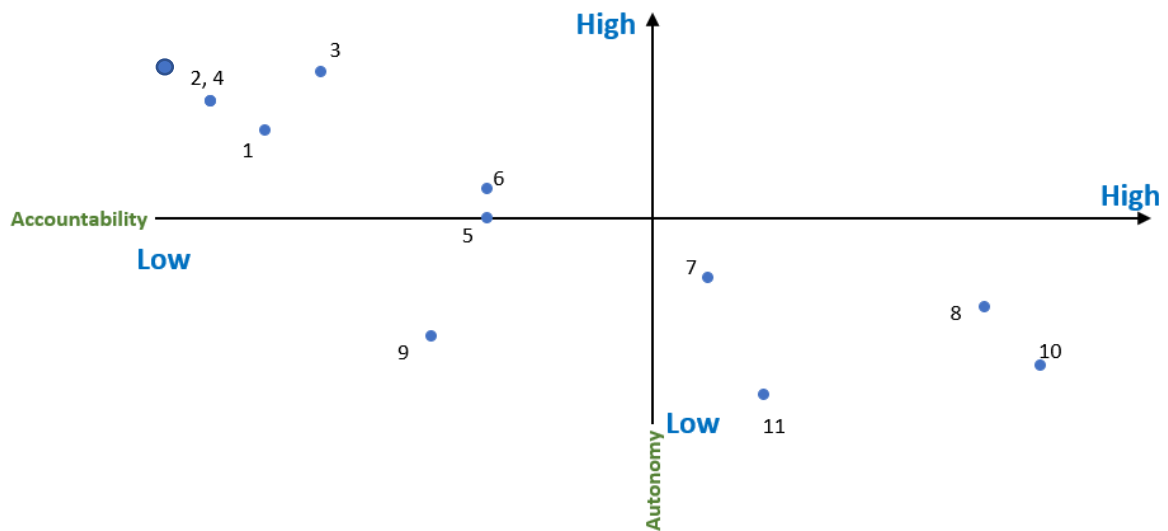
autonomy and accountability continuums identified earlier in this chapter to represent *trust*. As a result, the matrix should help the reader to understand further the holistic relationship between the two concepts as it is clear that autonomy and accountability are two major factors in determining and understanding these complex relationships.

The matrix is divided into four quadrants allowing identification of headteachers in the study that have relationships that could be described as being framed by one of the following:

- High accountability and low autonomy;
- High accountability and high autonomy;
- High autonomy and low accountability; or
- Low autonomy and low accountability.

As with the previous discussions regarding the establishment of the illustrative representations of the autonomy and accountability continuums, the matrix in fig 5.11 does not claim to be to scale or to be 'statistically' reliable, as I am not claiming this is a quantifiable phenomenon, as discussed in chapter 3.





KEY	St Mary's	St Hilda's	St Denis	Local	Forest	University	Acres	Dove	National	Midlands	Swan
School number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11

**Fig. 5.11 Matrix identifying the relationship headteachers have with their sponsors through the joint lenses of accountability and autonomy**

Therefore, headteachers in the top left quadrant with high autonomy and low accountability could be described as experiencing *high levels of trust* from their sponsors – these schools are **St Hilda's**, **St Denis**, **St Mary's** academies (all of the Church of England diocesan schools in my study) and **Local** and **University** academies. Whereas, the headteachers in the bottom right quadrant who experience low autonomy and high accountability are more likely to see their relationship with the sponsor as one of *low levels of trust* – these schools are **Acres**, **Dove**, **Midlands** academies (all members of national 'chains' with large numbers of schools) and **Swan Academy**.

## 5.6 Conclusion

The conceptual frameworks developed in this thesis, whilst having similarities with previous frameworks clearly expand upon the profession's knowledge of the relationships that sponsors have with their primary academy headteachers. As these relationships are complex, attempting to *pigeon-hole* the phenomenon is difficult but the typology presented of 'licensed autonomy', 'qualified co-creation' and 'directed implementation' to describe autonomy in the primary academy sector and the accountability typology 'flat non-executive', 'flat-executive', 'extended' and 'multi-layered senior management' moves on our understanding of the phenomenon.

Whilst there are three broad terms within the typology covering the Autonomy Complexity Framework, in reality the relationship between a headteacher and sponsor is not fixed, and as a result the fieldwork found the experience of headteachers can traverse a number of these three models on the continuum, in different aspects of their relationship and at different points in their relationship and therefore headteachers often experience a hybrid version as also identified by Greany (2018). There are also a number of accountability arrangements now in place that impact on headteachers. The conjunction of the levels of autonomy and accountability which primary headteachers experience in sponsored academies is likely to give an impression to headteachers of the level of *trust* that the sponsor places in them. Tschannen-Moran (2004) identified that trusting relationships should be defined by benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability and competency. Clearly, these are not attributes than an inanimate object and socially constructed phenomenon of

a sponsor can show, these are human attributes which would need to be exhibited by a member of the sponsor's central team to the headteacher, such as the CEO or director of education. It is debatable how such relationships can be secured when there is such a power dynamic between these senior management executives sponsors and their headteachers – especially as when there are multiple layers of accountability, as within some of the trusts in this research.

## **Chapter 6**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter summarises my key findings against each of the three research questions outlined in chapter 3, drawing together the findings in chapter 4 and the conceptualisation developed in chapter 5. Whilst the development of the two conceptual frameworks has been an important part of this thesis, other learning has also emerged which will be set out in this chapter in regard to the contribution to the profession's knowledge that I feel I have developed. Given that the research only focussed on eleven headteachers plus the five within the focus group, there are naturally limitations to the research which will be explored. Despite these reservations I do feel that the learning contained within this thesis is of merit and could aid the development of the phenomenon of sponsorship of primary schools – I have therefore set out recommendations to policy makers, sponsors and headteachers. This chapter concludes by examining the journey I have been on through the evolution of my research and how this has impacted upon my own practice.

### **6.2 Summary of key findings in relation to the research questions**

The research questions employed for the fieldwork were:

- Is leadership 'shared' between the sponsor and the headteacher?
- Can sponsored headteachers establish their own vision and values in their academies?
- How do primary headteachers in sponsored academies perceive their relationship with their sponsor?

The findings for each of these research questions are now summarised in turn:

### **Is leadership shared between the sponsor and the headteacher?**

If leadership is 'about direction-setting and inspiring others to make the journey to a new improved state for the school' (Davies, 2009, p2) then in answering my research question it needs to be determined who has the remit of direction-setting in a sponsored primary academy. Most leaders in my sample spoke with conviction of having the power to run their schools but then contradicted this by highlighting a raft of school leadership and management aspects that in reality they didn't have power over. It therefore appeared that many headteachers in the fieldwork were trying to convince themselves that they still had professional agency but what they articulated was that they had lost facets of their autonomy and that therefore there were others outside of the school enacting leadership that impacted upon their schools.

My research highlighted that the levels of autonomy experienced by headteachers in primary sponsored academies is not consistent. In fact, it ranges from those whose autonomy may resemble that of leaders in local authority schools to those who may feel their role is to merely implement the systems and procedures of the sponsor. My research identified that leadership *was* being *shared* between the sponsors and headteachers but in a variety of complex ways and to differing degrees. This therefore reinforces the work of Caldwell (2016) as cited in Salokangas and Ainscow (2018) who felt that the term 'autonomy' was misleading and proffered that instead we should refer to relatively high or

relatively low levels of autonomy for school leaders. My research has certainly brought into question the term 'publicly funded autonomous schools' (West, Ingram and Hind, 2006) – perhaps a more accurate term would be *publicly funded quasi-autonomous schools*.

It should be noted that my evidence identified that the type of relationship that the sponsor has with their headteacher is at the sponsor's behest - they frame and negotiate, on their terms, what the relationship will be like; there was no evidence of sponsors engaging in a discussion with their school leaders to determine what relationship would best suit the headteacher or school.

#### **Can sponsored headteachers establish their own vision and values in their academies?**

A synthesis of the literature and my empirical fieldwork highlights that this is a complex aspect of the relationship between headteachers and their sponsors. There are certainly examples of sponsors who are very directive regarding implementing their vision, as evidenced in some of the case studies within the research of Gibson (2014) and Greany (2018) which point towards sponsors, especially at their inception dictating the vision that must be delivered across their schools. Despite this, the evidence in my research was that these primary academy headteachers were mainly given the freedom to develop their own vision – although there was evidence that many of the headteachers were either in sympathy with the sponsor's vision and / or had an input into the sponsor's collective vision.

### **How do primary headteachers in sponsored academies perceive their relationship with their sponsor?**

The vast majority of headteachers within my research saw the sponsor as an organisation external to them, akin to the traditional model of schools in relation to LAs. Very few of the headteachers appeared to see themselves and their school as part of the same organisation. Most were positive about their relationship with the sponsor but there were tensions, with one outlier stating that he felt 'subservient' in his trust and questioning the values of the organisation he worked for. Others were critical of the lack of pastoral support offered to them. The accountability systems in place for monitoring and assessing headteacher performance have also changed considerably from the models previously in place when the schools would have been under LA control – always increasing accountability rather than decreasing it. Headteachers within my study were experiencing accountability within complex hierarchies in different ways – with a spectrum from low to high accountability. This increased accountability was often set against a backdrop of reduced autonomy for headteachers. As a result, a number of headteachers in this study were experiencing increased control by their sponsors. The relationship between headteachers and sponsors when viewed through both accountability *and* autonomy was conceptualised in chapter 5 through a lens of 'trust' with headteachers experiencing trust on a range from high to low. As a result, my study has shown that the perceptions of the headteachers were diverse as a result of the differing amounts of autonomy and accountability they were experiencing.

### 6.3 Contribution to knowledge

The aim of this research was to understand the relationships that sponsored primary headteachers have with their academy trusts in England. The Autonomy Complexity Framework helps the profession in identifying how autonomy is actually being experienced by primary headteachers in the sponsored academy sector in order to help in our understanding of these relationships. As the phenomenon of sponsored academisation is still developing, some of the conceptualisation from previous research is no longer applicable or the typology is misleading. Therefore, such terms as that used by Hill *et al.* (2012) of *informal collaboration*, Gibson (2014) *laissez-faire* or Carter (2017) *autonomous* to describe relationships that primary headteachers might have with their sponsors would be disingenuous as they imply little, if any control by the sponsor. My use of the term 'licensed autonomy' identifies that any autonomy headteachers experience in this sector is contingent on the scheme of delegation (the 'license') from the sponsor and can be changed at any time. The terminology used in other conceptual frameworks to describe the 'tight-end' of control on the spectrum, the *pedagogical chain* (Hill *et al.*; 2012), *autocratic* (Gibson, 2014), *standardised* (Carter, 2017), again do not correctly identify the relationships experienced by headteachers in my study; therefore the terms *directive* used by Greany (2018) and my *directed implementation* help move on our understanding – these headteachers are experiencing high levels of managerialism. An important aspect raised in my conceptualisation though is that the profession and academia should potentially move away from describing such relationships through single lens terminology as my fieldwork has shown that relationships are more complex than this – therefore headteachers are likely to find that in some aspects they have autonomy, whilst in other areas their



autonomy is restricted. As a result, my conceptualisation is more nuanced than some previous frameworks.

The models of accountability within sponsored academy trusts developed in chapter 5 further develops our understanding of the accountability sponsored primary headteachers experience which will impact upon headteacher's perceptions of their relationships with sponsors. These structures have been conceptualised with a typology of *flat non-executive accountability*, *flat executive accountability*, *extended accountability* and *multi-layer senior management executive accountability*. This moves on the profession's current understanding of accountability structures previously explored by Hill *et al.* (2012). My conceptual framework has shown that there are different levels of accountability associated with each structure, with some headteachers experiencing accountability similar to that when the school would have been with the LA to those headteachers who have multiple, repeating levels of accountability.

As a result of the two conceptual frameworks developed in this thesis, we now have a greater insight into the experiences of primary headteachers in the sponsored sector which has been further extended by combining the autonomy and accountability continuums to highlight the levels of *trust* that such headteachers experience. As a result, headteachers in my study who were members of a diocesan-led sponsored MAT were likely to experience high levels of trust (high autonomy and low accountability), whereas headteachers in national chains were more likely to experience low levels of trust from the sponsor (low autonomy and high accountability). The combination of the levels of accountability and

autonomy that headteachers experience is likely to frame their impression of their relationship with the sponsor.

In addition to the new conceptual frameworks developed for this thesis, other learning has evolved to add to the profession's knowledge; some of this may be new whilst other knowledge may further develop or corroborate existing studies. Firstly, many headteachers felt that they had retained their autonomy but on closer examination it was clear that most sponsors, to differing degrees, are directing their headteachers – what is interesting is why the headteachers didn't see this contradiction. This inability / reluctance to articulate their loss of autonomy may be linked to an attempt to preserve their professional identity. As a result, some headteachers more closely resemble the 'branch manager' of a retail store analogy proffered by West and Wolfe (2018) and similarly in Lewis and Murphy (2008), cited in Higham and Earley (2013), whose role is to mainly implement head office policy. Certainly, many of the school leaders in my study did not give an impression that sponsored primary academies are a further extension of site-based management; rather they give the impression that some sponsored academy trusts may actually be a retrograde step in the development of the phenomenon. Whilst sponsors who have reduced the levels of autonomy that their headteachers experience might be seen by some in the profession as a negative connotation of sponsored MATs, there were some headteachers who were happy to relinquish elements of their role to their sponsors. In fact, inexperienced school leaders may find the support offered through a 'qualified co-creation' model, or even 'directed implementation' a safety-net into their first headship and allow governors to recruit during a period of difficulty attracting teachers to headship.

My study also showed that different headteachers within the same trust may experience different levels of autonomy and that autonomy can therefore be contingent on the school's academic results and / or context. In addition to school context impacting on the level of autonomy experienced by headteachers in this study, other factors appear to be at play in regard to the level of autonomy and therefore the relationship the school leaders have with their sponsor *may* be determined by the size of the MAT, the length of time the school has been with the MAT and the type of sponsorship arrangement.

There was some confusion regarding the perception of the sponsor by the headteachers with many seeing the sponsor as 'outside' their own organisation, akin to local authority schools with the LA providing services to the school. As a result, headteachers often referred to the sponsor as 'them' rather than 'us'. In fact, the overall impression of a sponsor was often linked to how the headteacher perceived their relationships with the school improvement advisor allocated to them by the sponsor. Therefore there is a risk for sponsors that if they allocate an advisor who is not well received by the headteacher it may lead to the headteacher having a negative impression of the sponsor as a whole, as often the advisor is the main link between the central team and the school.

Most sponsors have continued to refer to their school leaders as 'headteachers' and it was clear that the term 'head of school' is not popular with the school leaders in my research. The salaries that sponsors remunerate their headteachers in this study suggests that they are not generally paid less than the recommendations outlined by the DFE for maintained school leaders; this could imply that sponsors value their school leaders as they are not

setting below *market* rates for their headteachers. This study was not large enough to determine if academy headteachers are generally being paid more than those in the maintain sector although two sponsors in my study had set a higher rate to attract / retain headteachers. Whilst salaries were not a matter of concern in my study many of the headteachers did raise concern regarding the pastoral support provided by their sponsors, which appeared to be weak, especially in regard to the headteacher's well-being.

As the structures and policies embed in the new educational landscape, the relationship that headteachers have with their sponsors will be fundamental, not only to education now, but also to the future of education, as if sponsors are seen in a negative light it may prevent teachers becoming headteachers in sponsored schools in years to come; an issue that the profession can do without given the already difficult climate in recruiting headteachers. No matter how we conceptualise these relationships, from those described as 'paternalistic' (Greany, 2018), 'autonomous' (Carter, 2017), 'laissez-faire' (Gibson, 2014), 'informal-collaboration' (Hill *et al*; 2012), and my 'licensed autonomy', to those at the other end of the spectrum, 'the pedagogical chain' (Hill *et al*; 2012), 'autocratic' (Gibson, 2014), 'directive' (Greany, 2018), 'standardised' (Carter, 2017) and my iteration, 'directed implementation', what is clear is that headteachers in sponsored primary academies are experiencing their relationship with their sponsor in many ways; often these relationships are complex and nuanced.

## 6.4 Recommendations

As my research is for a Professional Doctorate it was important that the research had a practical dimension as well as being concerned with conceptual development. Therefore, a crucial aspect is to formulate recommendations. Below I have outlined my recommendations that emerged from my findings; these are aimed at policy makers, sponsors and headteachers.

Recommendations to policy makers:

- Policy makers need to be clear to headteachers that academisation within the sponsored MAT sector may not lead to increased autonomy, and in fact it often reduces their autonomy. Instead policy makers need to be thinking of promoting the phenomenon in terms of the benefits regarding support for school improvement and reducing pressure on headteachers in regard to the *business* aspects of their roles, for example in regard to procurement and site maintenance;
- Sponsored academisation could be marketed as an attractive proposition to some leaders especially those considering their first headship as there is support to ease them into their roles.

Recommendations to sponsors:

- In order to ensure an effective workforce, sponsors should put in place pastoral support for their headteachers to try to prevent ill health through work-related stress, including considering what arrangements exist for supporting headteachers on long-term absence;

- Sponsors should be conscious that headteachers' perceptions of their organisations are likely to be heavily influenced by the relationship that the headteacher has with the school improvement advisor that they allocate to the school;
- Sponsors need to consider how they ensure that headteachers do not see the sponsor as an external agency;
- Trusts should be clear to prospective headteachers and governors what autonomy and accountability will look like on joining the trust and what their plans for these areas are in the medium to long term.

Recommendations to headteachers:

- Headteachers should enter dialogue with potential sponsors before joining to ascertain a number of key points regarding the relationship that they will encounter with the sponsor, especially in regard to their autonomy, and in particular how the sponsor perceives this relationship will develop over time. They will need to ascertain if their role will be more akin to a leadership or managerial model. This could be defined through a *contract of engagement* between both parties.

## **6.5 Limitations of research**

It is my belief that the research within this thesis has significantly added to the body of knowledge and provided insight that is phase specific and therefore removing the reliance on research which has previously been very secondary sector dominated. On commencement of this research in 2013 there was little evidence into the relationships of primary headteachers and sponsors; at this time researchers were reliant on the

conceptual framework proffered by Hill *et al.* (2012), which is clearly now out-of-date – since then the evidence base has been bolstered, in particular by the evidence presented by Greany (2018). Given that his research ran concurrently to my own fieldwork it is not surprising that there are consensuses that we both reach, although Greany (2018) does not confine his findings to primary academy headteachers only and therefore it cannot be guaranteed that his results are transferable to just this group.

Whilst the purposive sampling employed within this research has allowed for a cross-section of primary academy headteachers to be interviewed that are broadly representative of the different types of academy sponsors, the research does not claim to be representative of all relationships that exist between sponsors and headteachers. I therefore do not assert that my findings are generalisable across the sector. Given the limitations of my research I feel that a large-scale study of primary sponsored headteachers is now required with a particular focus on examining the impact of factors which may contribute to the relationships with sponsors, in particular the type of sponsor, the length of time the school has been in the trust and the school's context.

## **6.6 Implications for my own practice**

Tupling and Outhwaite (2017) are clear that there is distinction between the aims of a Professional Doctorate compared to that of a more traditional doctorate:

“The research element undertaken as part of the professional doctorate will relate to the work context of the practitioner / student and is aimed at making an original contribution to **practice**. Whereas in the traditional PhD,

candidates are expected to demonstrate an original contribution to **knowledge.**" (p2)

The most direct impact of contributing to 'practice' is likely to be in the researcher's own practice. I have certainly been on a journey since I commenced my professional doctorate in September 2013 at the University of Nottingham, not only in my career but also in my thinking around sponsored academy trusts. During that time, I have transitioned from being the headteacher of a LA maintained school, to headteacher of a stand-alone primary academy and lately to CEO of a sponsored multi-academy trust. In that period my thinking and understanding regarding academisation has also evolved. I originally left LA run schools after 14 years of successful headship due to my frustrations with the LA; this was in terms of poor value for money for services and the lack of support and challenge. Naively, I thought my positive experience as a subsequent headteacher of a stand-alone academy would be universal. This personal experience was one where I felt I had increased autonomy and freedom to use funds in the way I thought was to the best advantage of our pupils. I now see the education sector as more complex than this. On leaving LA headships I had not fully understood the implications the austerity measures were having on their services, resulting in a reduced service for my school. Equally, through my studies and being further immersed in the sponsored MAT sector it is clear that the sponsored movement is very varied.

Transitioning into the role of CEO and being in that role from inception of the MAT has allowed me to use the reading and fieldwork findings from my research and apply them to my own practice in establishing the MAT. Like any CEO of a multi-academy trust, I want to



ensure that the pupils in my schools are able to gain the best education possible, leading to their holistic development and good outcomes, therefore ensuring they are best equipped for experiencing rewarding and fulfilled lives. I wish to achieve this by supporting my headteachers through a highly effective central team and back-office services whilst keeping this team small to ensure that I can delegate as much finance to each academy as possible. To ensure this happens, I need a set of highly skilled headteachers. The salaries of the headteachers equate to one of the largest single financial outgoings for us as a trust; therefore, to be spending such a significant amount of public finances and not utilising the skills of this group effectively would be a poor use of public money. It is therefore necessary to support and nurture headteachers in order that they are a force for good across the trust. For this to be realised the fieldwork has shown that I need to ensure effective relationships are in place between the headteachers and myself, as CEO, and other members of the central team. Therefore, the model I want to see within my trust is that of 'co-creators'; this will ensure that the sponsor's vision and values are implemented and headteachers are empowered to implement contextualised initiatives with the skills and expertise of the MAT central team there to enhance that of the individual school leaders. As a result of the fieldwork and my research findings I plan to undertake the following:

- Put in place effective pastoral support for headteachers, including robust procedures identifying how to deal with the long-term absence of headteachers due to ill-health, in particular stress related illness;
- Nurture the peer-to-peer support networks of colleagues within the MAT at all levels;

- Annually revisit the MAT's vision and values with headteachers and work alongside them to ensure their own vision and values complement those of the MAT;
- Ensure headteacher remuneration remains at least in line with national pay recommendations and there is equity across the trust;
- Reduce accountability overlaps, ensuring local governance does not replicate systems already in place by the central team;
- Ensure there is an independent person for headteachers to consult if they have concerns regarding their performance management or issues arising from the central team;
- To be clear about the aspects headteachers have autonomy over and where this is not the case;
- Create an environment where leaders and colleagues in academies feel part of the MAT, rather than separate to it; key to this will be the vocabulary used by the central team;
- Ensure central staff working with schools realise the impression the headteacher has of them will underpin the relationship perception of the MAT for that headteacher;
- Ensure there are clear systems in place for making complaints and whistleblowing about the sponsor and central team.

As can be seen, the Professional Doctorate has been pivotal in developing me as a CEO, leading a large multi-academy trust, which was a key objective for my research, as outlined in chapter 3. The research has allowed me to read the most relevant literature connected

to my role and the fieldwork has given me a real insight into the impact decisions made by CEOs have on individual headteachers. As a result, I hope that the experience and the relationships that headteachers in my multi-academy trust have with the central team will be positive ones, to the benefit of our pupils.

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## **Appendix A – Three interview summaries**

### **Acres Academy**

**General relationship** - When the headteacher took over the headship there was an executive headteacher in post whose role she resented as she didn't feel the executive headteacher brought additionality to the school; at that stage she was referred to as 'head of school'. The staff were pleased when the post was converted to headteacher as they felt they were restricted in making changes they thought were required under the executive headteacher. When referred to as 'head of school' she felt inferior to other headteachers she met – she felt like her sponsor trusted her less. The headteacher felt she was paid less than she would be if she was not in a sponsored school but thought it was a trade-off as she received excellent support which she felt justified the lower salary. When she was promoted from 'head-of-school' to headteacher she received just one additional pay point. The headteacher stated that she had less 'freedoms' and had to implement a number of 'initiatives' from the sponsor when the school was in Special Measures. She described the compulsory assessment system implemented by the sponsor as a 'non-negotiable'. The headteacher stated that the sponsor expects initiatives to be implemented and if they are not the headteacher was clear that she would be 'answerable' to the sponsor. Staff were 'expected' to attend sponsor network meetings and events, although she thought the networks and meetings were 'fantastic', especially those related to safeguarding. The headteacher was adamant that if she had the option to leave the sponsor she wouldn't, predominately as a result of the excellent CPD they provide. She was pleased with all of the 'back-office' services provided by the sponsor but was clear that she could not source these services independently as that was 'non-negotiable'. The sponsor 'recommended' a

commercial curriculum scheme as it had been successful in other schools in special measures in their MAT. Although the headteacher felt she had the power to exclude she thought that the regional director would be 'upset' if she didn't 'discuss' the potential exclusion with her. With regard to admissions she stated that she followed the 'local authority' procedures. Headteachers who were in the trust at the beginning had some input into the development of the MAT wide visions and values; in her school she has constructed her vision 'around' those of the sponsor although she felt she had autonomy to set her own. She felt she had the power to implement her own initiatives in the school, as long as they were 'successful'. The school has retained its governing body but there is also a 'regional board' above this. The headteacher stated that the amount of support / challenge that the school receives is proportionate to the school's current Ofsted grade and its proximity to the next inspection. The sponsor centrally employs staff to act as consultants to support schools to develop. Headteachers organically support each other where a need is identified. She described the sponsor as 'good' and 'supportive'.

**Acres Accountability** - Previously, the headteacher stated she was answerable to the 'executive headteacher' and 'regional director' but now was only answerable to governors and the 'regional director'. The headteacher described her relationship with the sponsor as 'good' and 'supportive' but clarified that 'she wouldn't cross them'. The headteacher's performance is appraised by the regional director with the chair of governors 'sitting-in'. A termly review meeting is held with key members of the central team where progress towards targets are discussed and support allocated where required. There is a 'regional board' above the local academy board of governors.

## Swan Academy

**General relationship** - There is a central team within the MAT and the deployment of executive headteachers over some headteachers, but not this one. The trust refers to many of its leaders as 'heads-of-school' who are responsible to an executive headteacher and primary director. This headteacher felt that these 'heads-of-school' were more akin to assistant headteachers with responsibility for teaching and learning. Each school is allocated an 'improvement partner', although the head questioned their effectiveness. Key leaders from the MAT such as the CEO and finance director 'grew' out of the founding secondary school and therefore there is little primary experience within this team. The sponsor does not have centrally employed staff to support in the development of teaching staff and there is no formal mechanism in place for school-to-school support. The headteacher felt HR issues could get 'resolved' more quickly within his MAT setting rather than when he was in a LA but he felt the support for school improvement was poor – in fact he stated that the trust's focus was not always on children but instead upon growth of the MAT; he felt the 'business model' predominated in his MAT. He felt that the MAT was actually a barrier to school improvement and that on occasions it suited the motivations of the trust for schools not to improve. The headteacher felt the sponsor was becoming increasingly fixated on compliance and a 'one-size-fits-all' model which he felt was being brought in to protect those in senior roles in the central team who were worried about Ofsted MAT reviews. The headteacher was fighting the imposition of weekly assessments of pupils by the trust and he felt that they were fixated on finding 'evidence' all the time. The assessment system was put in place by the sponsor, although he did have complete autonomy over the curriculum implemented. He stated he didn't have complete control of

his budget and had to gain permission for most purchases; he questioned how the trust was using its finances. All purchases require authorisation by the central team and restrictions were put on some purchases due to cash flow issues. The headteacher felt that his autonomy was significantly restricted in regard to finance and school improvement; in some instances he felt there was an inherent threat that if the headteacher does not implement a decision of the sponsor that at the next school review they would be classed as 'unsatisfactory'. Whilst the headteacher felt his starting salary was comparable to that in the LA maintained sector, the sponsor restricts pay progression to every two years. The headteacher felt he had been given complete autonomy to implement his vision and values. The headteacher feels that meetings with the sponsor have set parameters and are controlled by the sponsor as are sessions to work collaboratively with other heads. The headteacher believes that the sponsor is 'results-driven'. The headteacher questioned how improvements were being made in other schools run by the sponsor; he also felt the pressure being put on schools was having an impact on staff and pupils – he also thought the trust was into 'short termism' as they didn't have a strategic approach to school improvement. The sponsor had no role in exclusions or admissions, although the head was concerned that the trust would change its admissions criteria to restrict vulnerable pupils joining. The headteacher had a number of issues with the sponsor but was reluctant to share these all with them as he felt the lack of a governing body made him vulnerable and questioned the effectiveness of a whistle blowing policy to whistle blow on those who had put in place that policy; he would have felt more comfortable questioning the decisions of the local authority rather than the sponsor. The headteacher felt his relationship was

‘subservient’ and that he was beholden to the sponsor. The headteacher can attend meetings and training as needed. Pastoral support was described as poor.

**Swan Accountability** – Performance management targets focus heavily on compliance and there can be up to 16 targets set; only the CEO was involved with the headteacher’s PM review, which the headteacher did not agree with. Headteachers in the MAT are asked to present and justify the school’s achievement data in front of the other headteachers. The sponsor undertakes regular ‘mocksteds’ to evaluate its schools.

## **University**

**General relationship** – Governors had elected to join the MAT even though they were an Ofsted ‘good’ school; this was agreed at the headteacher’s first governors’ meeting. They selected this sponsor as it reflected the ‘aims and aspirations’ of the governing body. Governors elected to academise due to the perceived lack of involvement from the local authority. The headteacher stated he was ‘supported to have autonomy’ in regards to teaching and learning – he said the school sets the direction regarding teaching within the trust’s parameters of a ‘broad and balanced curriculum’. The trust offers support and challenge regarding teaching; this support and challenge had improved over the last 12 months as the MAT had grown and his advisor had changed. As a result of the expansion of the MAT he feels he has less autonomy than when the school joined the trust. The headteacher doesn’t have total control of the budget – he is allocated funding based on the school’s needs. School leaders do not have automatic access to any school generated reserves. The trust provides a whole-range of back-office services; the headteacher is happy with these with the exception of HR support, which he would opt-out of if he had the power. The headteacher didn’t feel supported when he questioned the effectiveness of the MAT’s HR services. The trust has just introduced a trust wide assessment tracking system. The headteacher felt most ‘supported’ in regard to the curriculum through the university expertise. No control by the sponsor of exclusions or assessment. He is referred to as headteacher. Pay is commensurate. The governing body led the recent review of the school’s vision. CPD is encouraged, as are peer-to-peer reviews. Pastoral support was classed as ‘pretty zero’. Working within the local cluster of schools had diminished as a result of being part of the trust.

**University Accountability** – Half-termly ‘challenge advisor’ visits undertake observations and scrutinise data. Headteacher appraisal undertaken by three governors and the school improvement advisor. Pupil data is submitted to the sponsor six times per year. ‘Scrutiny’ by the sponsor had ‘improved’ as a result of a dip in pupil performance the previous year.

## **Appendix B – Interview schedule**

Can you contextualise your school for me regarding the area that it serves?

When did the school become sponsored?

Who is your sponsor?

Do you know why the school needed to be sponsored?

Do you know how this sponsor came to be running your school?

Is this your first headship?

How long have you been a headteacher?

Were you the headteacher of this school before the school became sponsored?

Are you in a MAT or Umbrella trust?

What is your current and previous Ofsted grades?

Is there a CEO or executive headteacher over you?

What happened to any previous headteacher?

You are the headteacher of a sponsored school. Can you tell me how being 'sponsored' makes a difference to you as the headteacher?

What title does the sponsor use to describe your role e.g. headteacher / head of school / principal / executive?

What are your thoughts on the title they use for your role?

Do you feel your salary is equivalent to headteachers of non-sponsored schools?

I want to get an impression of aspects that the sponsor controls rather than you. What would you say they were?

Who sets the vision for the school? Did you have an input into this development?

What values do you hold dear regarding the education of primary children?

Are you able to put these values into practice?



If you are, what helps to facilitate this?

If you are not, what blocks you from doing this?

Are you able to establish your own assessment systems?

Are you able to devise your own curriculum?

How does the sponsor hold you to account?

Does the sponsor delegate different levels of autonomy to its schools based on Ofsted grades / results or its own risk assessments etc?

Are there any restrictions placed on you regarding pupil exclusions by the sponsor?

Does the sponsor put pressure on you to school at a certain rate?

Does the sponsor want quick wins or is it more committed to long term development of projects, which sometimes take longer to have impact?

Do you feel that you can challenge your sponsor?

Have you ever found yourself in a conflict/disagreement with your sponsor? Can you tell me what it was, describe how it developed and how it got resolved? What did you learn from this experience?

Do you attend network meetings / conferences or are these attended by the executive headteacher and cascaded to you?

How would you describe your relationship with your sponsor?

Have you ever refused to implement something instructed by the sponsor?

What was the sponsors reaction to this?

What is the pastoral support for you as a headteacher from the sponsor? Is this any different to when you were a maintained headteacher?

How would you describe your approach to leading the school?

### **Concluding section of the interview**

Do you have any questions or would you like to add anything else to your responses?

Thank you very much for participating in this research.

## Appendix C- Ethics committee approval

2016/14/CDJ

School of Education – PGR Research Ethics Comments Form



The University of  
Nottingham

Name: Christopher Mansell  
Supervisors: Kay Fuller and Howard Stevenson  
Course: EdD  
Title of Research Project: A phenomenological study of the experiences of sponsored academy primary headteachers  
Is this a resubmission? Yes

Review C – Summary Review 3		
Date of review		
Outcome of review	Revise and Resubmit	
	Approved	X
<p><b>Comments:</b></p> <p>Thank you for the resubmission. I note the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. thank for including a list of possible questions for the participants dragon the interview. I do not see any evidence of questions concerning a personal / sensitive nature (ethnicity, age, sexual behaviour etc), so the form itself should reflect this (3, 2).</li> <li>2. good to see clarity about the: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• timeline for participants to review and consider inclusion of their data in your research. Will you be providing transcripts (if so, please include this on the information for participants) and a time limit; the consent form advises that they have a right to this.</li> <li>• how you intend to analyse the data;</li> <li>• the sorts of data to be used and are available in the public domain.</li> </ul> </li> </ol> <p>Good luck with your research!</p>		