Leading Within Limits: Exploring Constrained Leadership within English Multi-Academy Trusts.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author's Note
This article uses research from the author's doctoral thesis which is due to be submitted to the University of Suffolk in Autumn 2025, exploring school leadership experiences within Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) in England.

Journal's Area(s) of Research
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Abstract

Schools led by English Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) are presented in policy as models of autonomy and innovation. In practice, senior leaders report the experience of leading in MATs as controlled and bureaucratic, with leaders' work centrally-governed. This paper explores paradoxical tensions in MAT leadership. Using a qualitative method informed by constructivist theory, the paper presents semi-structured interviews with thirteen senior leaders in Suffolk. Central themes point to a systemic misalignment of the English academy system, and local responses to that tension. This paradox produces a spectrum of tensions, including autonomy and centralisation, identity and performativity, and democratic versus technocratic control. These tensions create emotional labour, identity conflict and a loss of professional agency. This paper makes use of Giddens' Third Way, Lukes' theory of power and Foucault's governmentality to frame these tensions and argue that a reframing of policy on leadership in schools is needed, with an explicit commitment to rebuilding trust, autonomy, and professional integrity.

Keywords

Academisation; Multi-Academy Trusts; School Leadership; Autonomy; Governance; Governmentality; Paradox Theory

Introduction

"Education, education, education". Purportedly, these were Tony Blair's three key priorities in the 1997 general election that returned a landslide victory for the Labour Party (Guardian, 2001). Education is an important election issue in which all political parties' campaign to try and win votes. Education is politics (Meadmore, 1999). Today, more than ever, education functions within a highly political context involving a large range of stakeholders both from outside and inside education (Meadmore, 1999). It is how a nation defines itself and sustains its cultural existence, transmitting beliefs, ideas, and knowledge from generation to generation (Ward & Eden, 2009). In addition to students and parents, stakeholders include "communities, governments, political parties, industry and commerce" (Meadmore, 1999, p.3).

What is the purpose of governance? Who should oversee how schools are operated, curriculums chosen, and funding supplied and spent? Currently, in England, schools that become academies have more freedom over many of these areas of operation (Eyles, Machin, McNally, 2017). These questions of role, responsibility and accountability have surfaced repeatedly as the trinity of school governance; national government, local government (local educational authorities) and independent groups such as religious organisations, charities, philanthropists, or businesses work interdependently to produce answers and solutions. The balance between these different educational providers has constantly changed but all have played and continue to play a part in school governance.

Over the last quarter of a century, the academisation of England's state school system has seen significant restructuring of educational governance, accountability and leadership (Ball, 2012; Gunter, 2016). Academisation was introduced under the New Labour Government in 2000 as a targeted 'intervention strategy' to improve schools that were perceived to be underperforming and located primarily in areas of socio-economic deprivation such as the inner-city London (Department for Education, 2010). Yet since then, it has been rapidly expanded and promoted by subsequent Conservative and Labour governments as a wholesale 'reform' model (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 2015).

Academies in England are schools that have adopted an alternate governance model to that of the local-authority system. Instead, academies are now managed by Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), umbrella organisations with similar operational structures, policies and practices, to which individual schools or academies may belong (Greany & Higham, 2018; Chapman et al., 2020). MATs are frequently led by executive teams and have introduced corporate managerial structures and cultures into English schooling (Greany & Higham, 2018; Chapman et al., 2020). Proponents of MATs have presented them as enabling greater operational freedom, responsiveness to local communities, and innovation and risk-taking in schools, freed as they are from the 'bureaucracy and constraints' of local authority governance (West & Wolfe, 2018: 31; Ranson, 2018).

At the same time, recent studies have challenged these accounts, by demonstrating how centralisation of decision-making and accountability in MATs, in combination with 'intense data accountability regimes', closely related managerial performance management regimes, and high-stakes performance inspection and evaluation of headteachers and schools, has the effect of constraining professional autonomy, identity and wellbeing of school leaders (Courtney, 2015; Wilkins, 2019). The study of leadership in MATs has raised several important theoretical and conceptual issues in the study of school leadership and MAT governance structures. Scholars have noted, in particular, the inherent paradox in the purported autonomy of schools in MATs, that is, while school leaders are held to be responsible for outcomes, their agency and decision-making is often circumscribed, disciplined and contained by the parameters of MAT frameworks, standardised policies and procedures, and internal audit and accountability cultures (Ball et al., 2012; Keddie, 2017). Recent studies have, for example, highlighted how performative pressures, associated with internal audit and evaluation processes, as well as external accountability demands, can lead to the fragmentation of identity, and emotional labour and work, in educational leaders in MATs (Riley & MacBeath, 2016; Sachs, 2016).

The study presented in this paper is about senior leadership within MATs in Suffolk. By listening to the day-to-day experiences of leadership and leading in a multi-academy trust, and by studying the experiences and sense-making of those working in MATs in Suffolk, this study contributes to a key debate on the experience of leading in MATs, in particular by considering the key theoretical literatures and policy debates on power, identity and the micropolitics of education. As part of this study, this research explores how MAT leaders experience and enact their work within and between multi-academy trusts and sets these

experiences against key theories of power and the state. This includes Giddens' (1998) Third Way, Lukes' (2005) three dimensions of power and Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality. The multi-theoretical approach, drawing on power theory and policy analysis, adopted in this study allows us to consider overlapping forms of control, surveillance and normalisation in the exercise of leadership within academy schools. The study draws from the dominant policy discourses on academisation as a site for organisational autonomy and educational leadership innovation (Greany & Higham, 2018; Chapman et al., 2020). Instead, we find that the organisational autonomy of academy school leadership in MATs is often only a 'relative autonomy', or what may be described as a "constrained agency" (Courtoty, 2015: 239; Ball et al., 2011). Constrained agency refers to a working condition where school leaders feel responsible for educational and organisational outcomes, but are at the same time constrained in their decision-making and practice by tightly defined structures, frameworks, and processes – often set by the trust governance systems, as well as by internal and external regulatory expectations (Wilkins, 2019). This constrained agency is thus visible in how leaders report the fragmentation and inner conflict of identity, the emotional dissonance they often feel in their work, and the internalisation of performativity and performative pressures (Ball et al., 2011). Such fragmentation and dissonance, are often based on leaders feeling, at times, over-reliant on bureaucratic rules and compliance, or at the same time, subjected to strong, but individualised or idiosyncratic, and therefore, quite often unreasonable, pressures and expectations of performance (Wilkins, 2019).

In line with a critical discussion in the literature, this paper argues that the changes in the culture and practices of school leadership described here represent important forms of 'regime of practice' change. They are visible in the blurring of the educational and public purpose of school leadership and can have detrimental consequences for the morale and wellbeing of school leaders and senior staff (Ball et al., 2012; Lingard, 2011). The findings of this study are also situated in the broader scholarly discussions on the trends and implications of neoliberal reforms for public sector organisations and leadership in the UK and beyond. These discussions have, for instance, noted the conflict between market-driven logics and professional value commitments and ethics based on relationality, care, collaboration and democratic accountability (Lingard, 2011; Sachs, 2016). The findings of this paper, therefore, point to the need to open up public discussion and debate about the purpose and future of the academisation of England's state school system. The paper also argues for the reconceptualisation of educational leadership, both in theory and in practice, away from managerialist and performative paradigms, and towards leadership models that foster trust, care and democratic forms of accountability for sustainable and equitable forms of school improvement (Ball, 2013; Ranson, 2018).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Academisation is an ongoing and significant reform to the state education sector in England which has been studied from a range of perspectives (Ball, 2012; Wilkins, 2019;

Gunter, 2016). A common finding is that tensions of autonomy and accountability, public versus private interests, centralisation, and decentralisation characterise academisation, raising questions about the democratic legitimacy and systemic coherence of academisation as a reform (Ball, 2013; Lingard, 2011; Ranson, 2018). This review of the literature found that there are common tensions in policies of academisation and its implementation.

Academisation has been conceptualised as a policy lever to improve educational standards, efficiency, and choice. The process has been rationalised by the government and its supporters in terms of market-oriented reform, a defining feature of neoliberalism (Department for Education, 2010; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 2015). Advocates of academisation often comment on the potential for greater autonomy, innovation, and responsiveness to local needs, which they argue would lead to improved pupil outcomes (Gunter, 2016; Greany & Higham, 2018). However, others view academisation as having led to the fragmentation of the education system, a weakening of democratic accountability, and that competition-based marketisation typically increases inequities and erodes community cohesion (Ranson, 2018; Chapman et al., 2020). These debates echo wider tensions in neoliberalism's impacts on public services, where the privileging of market logics and efficiency frequently undermines values of democratic participation, social justice, and collective responsibility (Ball, 2013; Lingard, 2011; Keddie, 2017).

The academy model was introduced by the New Labour government in 2000, in line with the 'Third Way' political philosophy which sought to combine social justice with economic competitiveness (Giddens, 1998; Gewirtz et al., 2015). Thus, early academies were designed to be innovative, semi-independent schools sponsored by external partners, such as businesses, faith groups, or the voluntary sector, to overcome local authority control and drive improvements in educational outcomes (Ofsted, 2005; Gunter, 2016). Following the Academies Act of 2010, the policy shifted from a selective improvement strategy to a universal policy approach in which all schools were encouraged or required to convert, leading to rapid expansion of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) – large corporate-style organisations responsible for multiple schools (Greany & Higham, 2018; Chapman et al., 2020; West & Wolfe, 2018).

MATs are often governed by centralised boards that assume many of the roles previously undertaken by local authorities, such as curriculum, staffing, and financial decisions, but often without the same level of democratic accountability or transparency (West & Wolfe, 2018; Keddie, 2017). Literature in this area has highlighted how MATs paradoxically recentralise power at the trust level, in contrast to the original policy promises of greater autonomy at the individual school level (Greany & Higham, 2018; Chapman et al., 2020). In addition, governance arrangements and accountability mechanisms within MATs have been heavily oriented towards performativity, emphasising measurable outcomes, compliance with regulatory standards, competitive positioning, and audit culture (Ball et al., 2012; Keddie, 2017; Courtney, 2015). This performative environment marginalises the

relational, contextual, and professional aspects of leadership, instead promoting a managerialist culture that often conflicts with educational professionalism and care ethics (Courtney, 2015; Edwards, 2014; Sachs, 2016).

The performativity of academisation shapes and redefines school leaders' identities by creating tensions between their professional values and the managerial demands (Ball et al., 2011; Sachs, 2016; Riley & MacBeath, 2016). In particular, the literature shows the contradictory and multiple roles of academy leaders who must be simultaneously educational visionaries, efficient managers, and compliant bureaucrats (Wilkins, 2019; Chapman et al., 2020). However, while much research is now available on the structural and policy implications of academisation, there is relatively less study of the lived experience of academies' leaders and how they manage, resist, or accommodate these competing demands (Wilkins, 2019; Chapman et al., 2020).

The review of literature adopted in the theoretical framework of this study is threefold. First, Giddens (1998) "Third Way" theory is used to interpret academisation as part of neoliberal policy that simultaneously combines the institutions of the state and the market. This new type of policy attempted to unite traditional social justice with economic competitiveness. This view allows this research to reflect academisation as a way of balancing such seemingly opposing values through hybrid governance, which is emblematic of socio-political changes more broadly within welfare and public services (Giddens, 1998; Ball, 2013; Lingard, 2011).

Second, Lukes (2005) three-dimensional view of power is incorporated to help measure and explain power. Lukes (2005) synthesises views of power into the visible, hidden, and invisible, which enable this paper to view the structure and process of power and effects as a comprehensive analytical lens for this research. Lukes (2005) also sees a role for consciousness raising in the struggle over power. The three-dimensional view of power accounts for different, mostly unseen, forms of exercising power as not just over people but also as a set of social relations and has thus been used in this review of literature to identify and understand how power is experienced and interpreted by MATs and their leaders (Lukes, 2005; Ball, 2012; Ranson, 2018).

Third, Foucault's (1991) theory of governmentality has been used to provide a wider understanding of power relations and different mechanisms in organisations. This perspective helps to view the power relations in MATs, structures, and processes in how power is reproduced as exercised over individuals by shaping self-relationships, rule of normative frameworks, and system of data use. This power lens helps to interpret how academy leaders self-regulate their conduct by conforming to MAT and regulatory expectations of accountability (Foucault, 1991; Lingard et al., 2013; Edwards, 2014).

The literature on academisation suggests that despite a rhetoric of increased autonomy, academies often function within a highly regulated and monitored environment characterised by performative surveillance, hierarchical governance structures, and a competitive marketplace (Ball et al., 2012; Greany & Higham, 2018). However, the lived experiences of academy leaders, their interpretations of these dynamics, and how they

may accommodate, resist, or navigate these demands, remain relatively underexplored. This gap in the literature provides an opportunity for this research to better understand leadership experiences in MATs, which is highly relevant for current and ongoing debates about the future of democratic governance and professional autonomy in English education.

Methodology

The research design is qualitative and interpretive, drawing on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). The methodology is fit for purpose in answering the research questions, which focus on the experiences of senior leaders in leading within MATs. The chosen theoretical lens supports the process of interpretation, helping to make sense of the meaning-making of participants, and provides space for the researcher to take up their role as interpreter of that data. This perspective also helps to balance the development of theory 'emerging' from data with an understanding that any theory is co-constructed by researcher and participants, rather than being 'discovered'.

Participants are the 13 senior leaders who took part in semi-structured interviews. Sampling is purposeful, drawn from a number of MATs in operation within Suffolk. Participants include two Chief Executive Officers, one Executive Headteacher, three Headteachers, two Deputy Headteachers, three Assistant Headteachers and one Director of Teaching and Learning. All had experience of working within the academy system, and provided depth of understanding about the practice, pressures and paradoxes of leadership at this level.

Interviews were structured around open-ended questions, which sought to capture and explore participants' perceptions about autonomy, governance, accountability, professional identity, emotional labour, and leadership practices. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded in iterative cycles of initial and focused coding, with the constant comparison method supporting identification of themes across cases, and memo-writing facilitating the development of theoretical categories.

Ethical approval was sought from the University of Suffolk, and all participants provided informed consent. Pseudonyms were used to maintain the anonymity of participants and organisations. The process was designed to be reflexive, as a matter of interpretation of data, and also in understanding the researcher's positionality as a former school leader in the English education system.

Methodologically, the study does not aim for generalisation but rather for theory. In this, it makes an addition to the extant literature by providing an interpretation of the ways in which leaders experience MAT governance, autonomy, and accountability.

Results

The thematic analysis of the data yielded four significant paradoxes that senior leaders in MATs are grappling with. These paradoxes were (1) Bounded autonomy; (2) Fractured identity; (3) Cultures of surveillance; and (4) Intensification of emotional labour.

1. Bounded Autonomy

The school leaders stated that, despite academisation offering the illusion of school-level autonomy, in practice, decision-making was heavily constrained. Many participants shared reflections on the limits of school-level autonomy. The shift in authority to the trust level was perceived as disempowering and at odds with policy rhetoric.

Autonomy was frequently qualified as 'delegated,' 'conditional,' or 'bounded' by participants. Trust-wide policies, frameworks, and expectations created a narrow corridor for leadership action and leaders were accountable for results but not really in charge of how things are run.

2. Fractured Identity

Leadership identity emerged as a contested and fractured space. Tensions between personal and professional values and the metrics-driven, performative culture were apparent. A sentiment echoed was that leaders care about young people, but the system rewards them for hitting targets, not necessarily for being a compassionate leader. Leaders frequently described a sense of role conflict and internal contradiction. They felt compelled to perform in ways that met trust expectations while suppressing aspects of their leadership identity that were ethical or community oriented. This performative dissonance, according to several participants, eroded their sense of authenticity.

3. Cultures of Surveillance

Data and accountability measures were described not as tools for improvement but as surveillance mechanisms. Trusts employed rigorous performance management systems that monitored attendance, assessment outcomes, staff performance, and even 'leader impact'.

Participants spoke of a pervasive sense of being under constant surveillance. There is an expectation that leaders are always visible, always accountable, always justifying their value. This culture of surveillance, for many, resulted in anxiety, defensive leadership practices, and a retreat from risk-taking and collaborative experimentation.

4. Emotional Labour and Wellbeing

All the participants reported significant emotional labour involved in navigating these systemic tensions. The work of holding in and balancing accountability with compassion, maintaining morale under the weight of compliance pressures, and reconciling personal values with organisational demands were emotionally draining.

Several leaders recounted experiences of burnout, insomnia, or even considering leaving the profession. m Leaders spoke about holding it together for their staff, pupils, and trust but sometimes leaders struggled to holding themselves together.

These themes are not discrete but interwoven; the illusion of autonomy contributes to identity fragmentation, performative expectations drive surveillance, and all lead to emotional strain. Leadership in MATs is characterised by a persistent negotiation of paradox, what might be termed as leading within limits or a constrained agency.

Discussion

In the Discussion section, a thoughtful analysis is provided that delves into the significant paradoxes faced by senior leaders in Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). The study's findings are contextualised within the broader academisation landscape in England, revealing how these leaders grapple with structural contradictions and normative pressures. The reconfiguring of leaders' professional agency, identity, and wellbeing through these tensions is highlighted. The critical analysis is anchored in the synthesis of Giddens' (1998) Third Way, Lukes' (2005) three dimensions of power, and Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges within MAT leadership.

Giddens' (1998) concept of the Third Way is central to understanding the discourses framing MATs as spaces of promise and opportunity, particularly in terms of autonomy and accountability (Ball, 2013; Giddens, 1998). However, the study suggests that the Third Way's attempt to reconcile social democratic and market logics often results in inherent contradictions. These contradictions are experienced by MAT leaders, as the study's findings indicate that autonomy is bounded and contingent upon compliance with performance metrics and externally set priorities (Courtney, 2015; West & Wolfe, 2018). Despite rhetoric around autonomy, MAT leaders encounter a reduction in their decision-making latitude due to the increased presence of policy instruments, performance frameworks, and organisational structures that enforce top-down control (Greany & Higham, 2018; Keddie, 2017).

Lukes' (2005) three-dimensional view of power provides a valuable lens through which to analyse control and decision-making processes within MATs. The visible form of power is represented by the centralisation of authority by trust boards and executive leadership teams, as highlighted by recent reforms that consolidate control over key areas like curriculum, finance, and people management (Greany & Higham, 2018; Chapman et al., 2020). The hidden dimension of power is exercised through the control of the agenda, with certain issues, such as performance and financial sustainability, being prioritised while others, like wellbeing or relational leadership, are marginalised or made invisible (Ball et al., 2012; Keddie, 2017). The invisible dimension is evident in how leaders internalise the dominant discourse of performance management, data accountability, and compliance, even when it conflicts with their personal values or ethical considerations (Lukes, 2005; Sachs, 2016).

Foucault's (1991) idea of governmentality provides a critical perspective on how power in MAT leadership is exercised both over and through individuals. The governmentality lens suggests that leaders internalise accountability frameworks and self-regulate their practices to align with the norms and expectations set by institutional structures and policy demands (Lingard et al., 2013; Foucault, 1991). This self-governance is visible in how MAT leaders engage in practices of self-surveillance, emotional regulation, and performative behaviour to align with the dominant rationalities of efficiency, performativity, and marketisation (Edwards, 2014; Wilkins, 2019). Rather than being coerced, leaders

participate in their own regulation by embodying and reproducing the very logics that constrain their autonomy.

Synthesising these three theoretical frameworks, this study reveals that the paradoxes of autonomy, care, and authenticity in MAT leadership are not merely operational issues but are symptomatic of the underlying systemic logics of the academisation project. The bounded autonomy, fractured professional identity, and emotional toll experienced by MAT leaders are interconnected consequences of the Third Way's tensions, the subtle workings of invisible power, and the self-regulating effects of governmentality (Ball et al., 2011; Riley & MacBeath, 2016). The study's insights point to the need to reframe leadership in MATs not as a technical exercise of strategic and instructional leadership but as a complex and dynamic form of identity work that is situated within overlapping and sometimes conflicting regimes of power (Courtney, 2015; Sachs, 2016).

The implications of this study for policy and practice are far-reaching. The current policy discourse that champions MATs as beacons of innovation and school autonomy must contend with the reality of constrained leadership agency. Policy initiatives and governance arrangements that purport to support autonomy need to critically examine how they are in practice accompanied by systems of accountability, control, and leadership micro-management that diminish leaders' agency and autonomy (Greany & Higham, 2018; West & Wolfe, 2018). Leadership training and professional development programmes in MATs need to be more attentive to the emotional, ethical, and political dimensions of the leaders' work and recognise how these are enmeshed with the technical aspects of school and classroom leadership (Riley & MacBeath, 2016; Sachs, 2016).

For MAT boards and executive leaders, the study's findings should prompt a reflection on how to reconfigure governance arrangements to support, not stifle, professional agency, relational leadership, and democratic accountability. This may involve devolving decision-making powers, enhancing transparency, and embedding processes and structures that prioritise wellbeing and equity alongside performance (Keddie, 2017; Ranson, 2018). Finally, this study suggests that rather than conceiving of paradox as something to be eliminated, resolved, or eliminated, MAT leaders could embrace the inherent tensions and uncertainty of their leadership work as a more honest and humane approach to educational leadership – one that places greater emphasis on trust, integrity, and democratic values rather than control, compliance, and market logic (Ball, 2012; Sachs, 2016).

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the complex and often paradoxical nature of leadership within Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) in England, revealing how senior leaders navigate a landscape marked by constrained agency. While MATs are rhetorically framed as vehicles for autonomy, innovation, and local responsiveness, the findings demonstrate that centralised governance, performative accountability, and technocratic management frequently circumscribe leaders' professional discretion. Through the integrated lens of Giddens' Third Way, Lukes' dimensions of power, and Foucault's governmentality, this paper has unpacked the multiple layers of control that shape leadership practices, identities, and emotional experiences within academised systems.

The tensions between autonomy and control, care and compliance, and authenticity and performance are not anomalies, but systemic features embedded in the neoliberal policy architecture governing MATs. Leaders are caught in a web of visible, hidden, and invisible power dynamics that reshape their subjectivities and limit their capacity to enact leadership aligned with educational values and democratic accountability. This constrained agency generates emotional dissonance and identity fragmentation, posing significant challenges for leadership wellbeing and sustainability.

These insights carry important implications for policymakers, educational leaders, and leadership development programmes. There is a pressing need to rethink governance models to balance accountability with genuine professional autonomy and relational trust. Leadership preparation and ongoing support must address the emotional and ethical dimensions of leadership, equipping leaders to critically engage with and, where necessary, resist performative pressures.

Ultimately, fostering a more humane and democratic educational leadership requires moving beyond market-driven narratives to centre care, integrity, and collective responsibility. Such a shift is essential if the promises of academisation, to improve educational equity and excellence, are to be realised in practice rather than rhetoric. This study contributes to ongoing debates about the future of school leadership in England, advocating for policies and practices that recognise and support the complex realities faced by those leading within Multi-Academy Trusts.

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