**Collaboration, competition and conflict:**

**An ethno-case study of a family of schools in England**

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# Abstract

The architecture of the school system in England has changed considerably since 2010. Most state-funded secondary schools are now academies, independent of local authority control. In this new educational landscape, many single academies and multi-academy trusts (‘MATs’) are collaborating in formal and informal ways. As this transformation moves apace, there is little academic research on the views and motivations of leaders in these organisations as they develop. There is also little knowledge on the inner workings of these academies and MATs (MATs) because they are not inspected.

This thesis explores the perceptions of school leaders in a newly forming federation of schools that later became a MAT. It looks back in time to identify the source of leaders’ competitive motivations and charts the history of the relationships between case study schools over two decades.

Using the lenses of ‘actor–network theory’ (ANT) and ‘coopetition’, the thesis presents an ethnography of a developing network of schools. It describes an emerging network of ‘actors’ and the ways in which they interact. The thesis goes on to show how the juvenile field of coopetition can be applied to school federations and MATs. The thesis, therefore, contributes to both the knowledge we have on MATs and coopetition. This description of how schools interact is valuable new knowledge as more and more schools join MATs and we begin to see the first failed MATs breaking up and schools being ‘re-brokered’. The thesis finds that the negative consequences of collaboration are attributable to fundamental weaknesses in leadership practices but that these weaknesses are exacerbated in otherwise skilled and dedicated school leaders by the development of networks within a pseudo-marketised education system, alongside an imbalance of competitive and cooperative actions.

It recommends that school leaders embarking on leading school federations and MATs should be cognisant of the existing research on coopetition and that they have a deep knowledge of the longer-term narratives that drive inter-organisational understanding. It concludes that some elements of the wider education network need to be ‘democratised’ so that school leaders have a better understanding of the networks in which their schools reside.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 The local context

*This chapter outlines the local context of the ethno-case study, introduces the research question and outlines my professional biography. It gives brief details of the contribution that this thesis makes to the body of knowledge in the field of school collaboration and outlines the structure of the thesis.*

Corton (a pseudonym) is a medium-sized town in England. In terms of secondary education, the town contains two high schools and a number of primary schools. This thesis explores the changes to the education system in the town against a backdrop of profound change in the education sector nationally. It investigates how the relatively new phenomenon of ‘federation’ and the formation of multi-academy trusts (MATs) have an impact on those schools, the school leaders and the communities the schools serve. Specifically, the thesis investigates the perceptions held by school leaders about the challenges of school collaboration and how these perceptions lead to a range of actions, decisions and personal/political dynamics. It answers the following question:

How do school leaders perceive the challenges of school-to-school collaboration and what does this tell us about:

* how the network of actors in school-to-school collaboration might be described and understood, and,
* how coopetitive tension manifests itself in school-to-school collaboration, and,
* the perceived impact of leaders’ actions in school-to-school collaboration.

## 1.2 Professional biography

From 2002 to 2016, I worked in schools in Corton. Though based mainly in one school, I worked in all of the schools that formed the case study for this research. When I began the EdD, I was an assistant head teacher with responsibility in one school. I was interested in the way in which national policy on school collaboration was having an impact locally and so chose this as my topic of study. As a researcher who was also involved in school-to-school collaboration, and subsequently as the school in which I worked went through the stages of a soft federation, a hard federation, academisation and the formation of a MAT, I was interested to see the ways in which the wider systemic elements of England’s school system impacted on the local context and a range of stakeholders.

In 2012, three schools in Corton formed a federation, and disbanded their governing bodies, reforming one shared governing body in a ‘hard federation’. During my doctoral study, though unrelated to it, I formed and led an inter-school working group to promote consistency and improvement in pedagogy across the schools. Following this, I applied for a role as a senior leader across the two high schools. This role was the third role designed by governors (the other two being the executive headteacher and the executive business manager) that aimed to facilitate much closer working between the schools, as a prelude to substantial organisational change across the schools. The role, which was at deputy-headteacher level across the two high schools, aimed to align and develop the cultures and relationships across all of the schools, promoting good professional relationships and partnership working. As a part of this role, I ran a National College leadership training programme for around 30 middle leaders from across the schools, directed an inter-school international leadership development programme, and led a Master’s course for teachers from schools across the town. As a result, my researcher status changed during the course of the doctoral work from someone who although working within the federation had an academic interest in it, to what one might term an ‘embedded researcher’ – a member of the cross-school team within the larger organisation that was the subject of study (the federation, then latterly the MAT). The challenges and ramifications of this are explored in detail in chapter 3. This latter role gave me a unique insight into the cultures in all the schools, enabled me to build strong relationships with school leaders from all of the schools, and kindled my interest in how relationships between educational institutions develop and, indeed, fracture and fail. Following three years in that role, I left the town’s schools to work as a civil servant in the education sector. I am currently a Senior Her Majesty’s Inspector responsible for school inspection policy in the national education directorate. I am on the working group for Ofsted’s response to MATs and involved in research for Ofsted on MAT effectiveness. I was recently the specialist advisor for the education inspection framework, which Ofsted launched in 2019.

## 1.3 Contribution to knowledge

This thesis makes a key contribution to knowledge in that it charts the failure of school-to-school collaboration through the voices of the professionals who worked within it. While some academics have recently identified the uneasy co-existence of collaboration within a competitive school system (for example Armstrong and Ainscow 2018), this thesis approaches this conundrum using the theoretical lenses of ‘actor–network theory’ (ANT) and ‘coopetition’. It explores the specific ways in which the English school sector can be seen through these lenses. The thesis also proposes new developments of these analytical tools specific to schools. It offers new insights into how elements of the English school system (or ‘network’) interact at the local level and offers recommendations that have the potential to change the relationships between these elements of the system. This work has the potential to ameliorate the negative impact of competition, and sometimes uneasy collaboration, on all stakeholders in schools.

## 1.4 The structure of this thesis

This first chapter serves as an introduction to the thesis and gives the reader information about the field of study and my professional biography. Chapter 2 goes on to outline some of the key published literature that informs the field of school structures and leadership. It outlines in general terms how school structures in England are changing and some of the theoretical concepts surrounding these structures. The literature review is short as a result of the structure of the EdD course, in which a separate literature review is completed and a shorter, more focused review is submitted with the final thesis. The third chapter outlines the methods and methodologies employed in the primary research that underpins this thesis. A findings chapter follows. In this fourth chapter, the characteristics of the case-study town are explored. Information is presented in two ways: in continuous prose with extracts from interviews; and in fictionalised narrative episodes called ‘critical incidents’. These critical incidents are presented in text boxes. The separation of these critical incidents from the main body of the thesis serves to allow the reader a deeper understanding of the findings and discussion by experiencing the narrative behind them. The discussion chapter (5) shows the relevance of current research and literature in the field of school collaboration and suggests some new models and understandings that emerge from the discussion of findings.

A conclusion, recommendations and implications for further research chapter then draws together the key arguments and leads to six recommendations for the wider sector. Finally, I demonstrate the ways in which undertaking this EdD has contributed to my professional practice. It outlines what I am doing with the knowledge on the national stage as I work as part of the team developing Ofsted’s approach to school collaborations and develop the democratisation of information and transparency of Ofsted’s work.

# Chapter 2: Literature and theoretical concepts

**2.1 Introduction**

*This chapter begins by exploring the important changes in educational discourse from the then Labour Prime Minister James ('Jim') Callaghan’s Ruskin speech in 1976, with particular emphasis on what Callaghan proposed were the purposes of education. The chapter goes on to give an overview of school effectiveness, arguing that the fluidity of ‘purpose’ in education makes school effectiveness a fragmented concept. As one of policy-makers’ main vehicles for educational effectiveness, an exploration of the history of academisation, marketisation and competition follows. These are seen through the theoretical lenses of actor–network theory (ANT) and ‘coopetition’. The chapter ends with an exploration of leadership seeing leaders as actors who implement policy. It discusses the ways in which educational leadership as a concept can be characterised within current educational discourses and gives an overview of how school collaborations might be classified.*

It seems unthinkable in 2020 that politicians would not have a deep involvement in education. However, Callaghan’s speech in 1976 marked the beginning of politicians’ determination to have a major impact on all elements of educational policy in England. It was the first time that a politician had made a major speech on the topic of education, and Callaghan was ‘severely reprimanded’ by the then chief inspector of schools for making such a speech without his approval. Against a backdrop of the ‘Black Papers’ (as opposed to government White Papers, these were educational papers published in an influential academic journal) and an international economic crisis, the very first mention of the *purpose* of education in Callaghan’s (1976) Ruskin College speech was to “…how to solve economic problems”, a movement which has since been mirrored internationally (Tomlinson 2003).

From this clear expression of the aim of education, Callaghan expanded later in the same speech to suggest that education was: “to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive, place in society, and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other but both.” (ibid) The question of the purpose of education was one which was being asked in many parts of the world in the 1970s, with Page suggesting that: “educational research and development have repeatedly run around in the fog of undefined goals” (1972, p33). So, whether education is for the supply of a suitably skilled workforce to maintain the economy or the “long-range human goals of happiness, adjustment or equality” (ibid), debates about it are muddy and, even now, there seems to be no current consensus. However, even in the 1970s, politicians and educationalists were asking questions about the purpose of education and expressing their answers to these questions through the inspectorate (the then Her Majesty’s Inspectorate), the curriculum (Halpin et al. 2004), and other control and accountability mechanisms (Batteson 1997, Whitty 2016).

Callaghan’s Ruskin speech and the consequent instigation of a ‘Great Debate’ was, arguably, the beginning of education’s time as an area for keen public debate (Forrester and Garratt, 2016). This reconfiguration of education’s role in wider society – away from it being peripheral to most other governmental concerns (Page, 1972) to it being a central part of the economic engine of the country – was, partly, as a result of ongoing political and media skepticism (ibid p368) about the effectiveness of schooling that was caused, in part, by a lack of agreement as to its purpose. Regardless, the 1970s saw the genesis of what might be called ‘neoliberal’ educational policy (Forrester and Garratt 2016); competition in a marketised environment. This policy sees education as having an underlying ‘economic rationality’ (Kascak and Pupala 2011 p146) which envisages the purpose of education being to: “create an individual that is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur” (ibid p148).

**2.2 The 1988 Education Act**

The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) is widely regarded as a ‘landmark’ Act, bringing a ‘tidal wave’ of reforms (Forrester and Garratt 2016 p14) and the most influential Act since the Butler Act of 1944. Reflecting on the lack of political interest in education between 1944 and the mid-1970s, we see in 1988 the nexus of a range of mechanisms which signal education’s central place in the political landscape (Bradley and Taylor 2010). The ERA addressed the questions posed by Callaghan and others in the 1970s. It established what pupils should know through the national curriculum and national assessment as opposed to a school/locality/teacher-designed curriculum. New, more agile, oversight was introduced (James 2014) in the form of governing bodies as opposed to local area control. Mechanisms to tighten control over the sector (e.g. league tables) and to begin to open up a market in the education sector (‘formula’ funding, open enrolment and parental choice and diversity) were also introduced. Many of these neoliberal control mechanisms were subsequently developed by successive governments, for example in the form of specialist schools (Heath 2009) and the free-schools policy of the former Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition and current Conservative government.

Between 1988 and the present day, change in the state education sector in England has been so relentless that attempts to map it are still incomplete (Courtney 2015; Woods and Simkins 2014). There has been privatisation on a scale not before seen in the education sector (Hatcher 2008), creating an education sector full of tension and contradiction (Exley and Ball 2011). This has been characterised by major, fundamental reform which some argue has all but crushed the state’s control over the sector (Lupton and Thompson 2015). These reforms, at times gaining pace as one or another education minister tweaks or accelerates change, are variously described as a transformation (Hatcher 2013), as highly complicated and multi-faceted (Ball and Junemann 2011), as quite radical (Woods et al. 2007), or as complicated and interwoven (Ball 2009). The variety of complex and interlinked factors, local, national and international, have worked and continue to work together to bring about an uncertain and rapidly changing situation in England’s schools (Gorard 2014).

The ERA gave rise to city technology colleges (CTCs), which operated outside of local funding and control, under the control of the headteacher and governors and answerable directly to the Secretary of State. The move to local management of schools (LMS) and grant maintained schools (GMS) consisted of overt and deliberate ways of further diluting schools’ answerability to local authorities (LAs), and therefore decentralised control (Foreman 2006). That said, local authorities (LAs) remain an important, though changing, part of the educational landscape. In his evidence to the Education Select Committee (2010), Charles Clarke (education secretary October 2002 to December 2004 under the 1997 to 2010 Labour government) described the move from local accountability as a “process…moving away from the idea that local education authorities could run things…” (2010 EV4). Currently, the government is considering how LAs could be placed to deliver an accountability mechanism to mitigate against the effects of the lost oversight as a result of the academies programme (Fiske 2017; Department for Education 2019).

**2.3 Privatisation**

The initial moves to bring schools more fully out of LA control and to privatise them were made following the ERA in 1988 and built on with New Labour’s city academies programme in 2000. The first three of Labour’s academies opened in 2002. The aim of these schools, free from LA control, was to “challenge the culture of educational under-attainment and to deliver real improvements in standards” (the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2004 cited in Gorard 2009 p1). These early academies were formed from existing schools, sometimes more than one, that were perceived as failing schools. The schools were independent of LA control, funded directly by government without the mediation of the LA. They also benefitted from financial support from sponsors. While the reforms over four decades have signaled successive governments’ desire to make schools more effective through marketisation and the proliferation of school types (creating diversity and consumer choice), the notion of what school effectiveness means sits underneath as a problematic and fluid concept.

**2.4 School effectiveness**

Chitty (1997) argues that one of the main concepts that underpinned academic and secondary modern systems of the 1950s and 1960s was the tacit and widely held belief that genetics play a very large part in a child’s intellectual capacity. This early concept of school effectiveness is not without its contemporaneous equivalents. For example, Cummings (2013) argues that genetics explains more of the variation between pupils’’ attainment than all but a very small number of academics dare discuss. That said, the hereditary nature of intelligence (however defined) is, currently, rarely discussed as a precursor to pupil attainment. These underlying beliefs as to the nature of intelligence leads to a concept of school effectiveness which is to hone and prepare pupils *with innate ability*, separating them from those without this ability. Within this discourse, success of the system as a whole is defined primarily as its ability to sort pupils then to educate, not to educate in advance of some form of sorting. The site of educational potential is the pupil, not the school.

Between the 1940s and 1970s, various academics investigated the impact of the school on pupils’ schooling outcomes. They showed that schools have a limited impact on pupils’ outcomes (whatever these outcomes might be). The term ‘educational fatalism’ emerged, based on Bernstein’s assertion that education cannot compensate for society (Bernstein 1970). Whether it is compensating for societal infrastructure that curtails pupils’ abilities to utilise the education presented to them, or their hereditary propensity to be able to learn, this educational fatalism was broken out of somewhat in the 1970s. Both the 1970s and the 1980s produced some less pessimistic perspectives on school effectiveness. These included a range of studies that, arguably, showed that there were some factors associated with schooling that led to improved outcomes for all children, including those at some sort of disadvantage (Rutter et al. 1980; Mortimore et al. 1988). These factors include school leadership, the quality of teaching, school climate, and collaboration with families (Mortimore et al. 1988).

It appears that the acceptability of argument that either social or genetic disadvantage has any impact on pupils’ attainment is, within current educational discourse, highly problematic. Mortimore and Whitty (1999) argue that current ways of judging school effectiveness (league tables and other national metrics) largely ignore social disadvantage. They also argue that any analyst who wishes to point out that not all pupils have the same starting points has been branded as lacking in ambition for pupils or patronising towards the disadvantaged.

Evaluating the effectiveness of schools is problematic (MacGilchrist et al. 2004). Linking policy change to changes in school effectiveness is even more problematic. Where studies into school effectiveness focus on the classroom level (ibid pp17-22), they tend not to problematise the very nature of the question: what does it mean for a school to be effective? (Muijs et al. 2014). The focuses of the effectiveness research are blurred and interactive (system, school, classroom and teacher effectiveness) and the difference between school improvement and school effectiveness is similarly ill-defined.

Often, school effectiveness research centres itself around one element of practice, within which it attempts to identify successful levers to school effectiveness such as pedagogy (for example, Sasson 2019; Lopez-Agudo and Marcenaro-Gutierrez 2017) or school leadership (for example, Robinson and Gray 2019; Tuytens and Devos 2018). Across these studies (sometimes necessarily, given their international nature), the unit of evaluation is inconsistent. Commentators give consistent caution as to how data on school effectiveness ought to be interpreted. Reynolds et al. (2019) suggest that these are central problems that place real restrictions on the use of studies purporting to show the key to educational effectiveness. For Reynolds et al., the studies fail to tell us anything at all useful. Herein lies the problem in evaluating system-level structural change such as the move from standalone schools to federations, academies and MATs. The effectiveness of early academies was trumpeted loudly, with success being claimed swiftly after the policy was enacted (Gorard 2009).The National Audit Office (2007), while acknowledging that it would take some considerable time to see the full effect of the programme, claimed that the first 46 academies had seen improvements in outcomes for pupils, delivered good value in terms of building costs and the quality of buildings, and aided social justice. Some commentators (for example the Anti-Academies Alliance and the National Union of Teachers (Long 2015)) called these successes into question with arguments similar to those used right now when judging the success of the academies programme. Gorard takes a critical stance on this, asking whether making schools independent of local control solves the ongoing issue of failure without changing the nature of pupils in those schools, given that the early schools did not do any better than the schools they replaced when adjusting for changes in the nature of pupil intake.

Gorard rightly identifies some of the key issues in judging the impact of educational reforms on school-level effectiveness. He uses the proportion of pupils reaching level 2 (meaning five good (grades A to C) GCSE passes). However, some schools used qualifications equivalent to GCSEs that could be argued to be easier to pass.

As the key accountability measures changed over time, there was a regular re-hashing of schools’ rank orders. For example, whether factoring in five good passes including English and mathematics or looking at value added figures, the picture shifts. Gorard perceptively suggests that judging the performance of academies should be done “in relation to their stated aims over time” (ibid p5). Accusations of narrowing of the curriculum leading to perceived successes were also levelled at the academies movement by the Anti-Academies Alliance (Long 2015). Between 2002 and 2010, the aims and purposes of academies underwent a fundamental shift. The White Paper ‘*The Importance of Teaching’* (DfE 2010) purported school autonomy to be at the centre of school quality *for all schools*, that this had been ‘established beyond doubt’ and that the experimental CTCs of the late 1980s were testament to the success of school autonomy, being: “…innovative…among the best in the country” (p51). The White Paper asserts that the key to further success is the making autonomous of *all schools.* It argues that there is a causal link between school autonomy and “…closing the attainment gap [between more and less disadvantaged pupils]” (ibid), having high standards and continued improvement – improvement that could be argued to be fictitious (Dale 1989). The list of measures that are implied and stated in the White Paper exemplify the range of muddled metrics used to judge policy interventions in school structures from the CTCs through to academies, with it mentioning the securing of standards, turning around schools, promoting social mobility, improving inspection grades, and securing higher, better grades for pupils at GCSE. Important to note is the agent of innovation which the White Paper expects will drive improved effectiveness, however imprecisely drawn this effectiveness is: that of “school leaders and teachers, not bureaucrats” (ibid p55).

For example, in 2010, Michael Gove signaled the government’s intention for the speed to increase further. Indeed, the Education Secretary’s March 2012 speech to the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) union stated: “And lest anyone think we should slacken the pace of reform – let me reassure them – we have to accelerate…I welcome the injection of new thinking…as more and more…enter new partnerships and federations” (DfE 2012 p1). What seems to be missing from the national debate, arguably, is any longer-term or empirical system knowledge of how schools can work together and the particular mechanics of these inter-school relationships. As mentioned above, successive governments have engaged in an uncomfortable set of policies which appear to centralise and decentralise control simultaneously, or ‘fragmented decentralisation’ (Ball in Cookingham-Bailey 2016; Forrester and Garratt 2016).

Many of these changes were seeded over the previous decade (Chapman et al. 2010). The 2002 Academies Act gave schools, which had traditionally been under LA control, the ability to become more independent. The 2010 Academies Act further increased the speed at which the conversion of schools to academies could take place as a result of streamlined arrangements for ‘academy orders’ (a legal order for a school to exit LA control), to be sought by governing bodies. A continuing crisis in recruiting leaders to single schools has contributed to the need for executive control over multiple schools (Howson 2010), while at the same time schools have more freedoms to innovate, restructure and adapt their governance. The policy of restructuring schools and changing leadership and governance “remains central to the English government’s school improvement agenda” (Chapman et al. 2010).

What is unclear is the effect of these changes on a local and system level. Early analysis of the academies programme (Gorard 2009) showed the profound difficulties in evaluating school effectiveness over time. Gorard points out that the use of pupil-level performance data is undermined by the impact of pupil context on that data. While some of the early academies posted improved pupil outcomes, their pupil populations had seen considerable change: the proportion of disadvantaged pupils in the school had decreased over time and many academies, when this was adjusted for, had regressed in terms of pupil outcomes (ibid p5). Added to this, Gorard identified a key difference in the *sorts* of courses these results were based on. Academies tended to enter more pupils for GCSE equivalent qualifications. There are also the complexities of changes in key performance indicators over time (from % GCSEs grade C and above to five GCSEs grade C and above including English and mathematics, to value added, and latterly to progress and attainment across a suite of subjects). PriceWaterhouseCooper’s (PWC) (2008) evaluation of the early (pre-2008) academies’ effectiveness supports Gorard’s assertions that evaluating the effectiveness of academies is fraught with difficulty. PWC (2008) found that the effects of structural change on schools when they become academies did not account for the changes in outcomes for pupils after the schools changed their status: they argued that there is no such thing as the ‘academy effect’. A range of other reports raise similar questions about the claimed ‘academy effect’ (Long 2015). It becomes clear that drawing any conclusions about the impact of academisation on school effectiveness is, at best, inexact.

There are many claims that changes in structure, governance and leadership lead to improvements in outcomes for young people (for example Chapman et al. 2008, 2010; Chapman and Mujis 2009; Chapman and Fullen 2007; Ainscow and West 2006). Therefore, for these academics, school improvement comes, at least partly, through changes to school structures. School effectiveness is enhanced through leaders’ attention to school structure. However, nothing approaching a causal link has yet been established. Indeed, Chapman (2015) asserts that, as a result of the pace of change in the English education system, any improvements are hard to define and calculate. Furthermore, the complexity at the nexus of the political, educational and personal serves to make unclear what an improvement in outcomes looks like. For Chapman it is: “…even harder to assess the extent to which or how these developments relate to outcomes. Therefore, it is unsurprising the knowledge base pertaining to ‘what works’ and ‘why’ lags behind policy and emerging practice.” (Ibid p47). Educational outcomes – indeed many aspects of school education – are difficult to quantify. To compare one school with another, one year group, one class, or an individual is an activity fraught with complexity and controversy.

The structures of schools have diversified. The English system now has hard federations, soft federations, collaborations, co-locations, cooperatives and MATs, to name but a few school-organisation types (Chapman 2015). Leadership structures are diversifying, with, for example, executive headships (heads of more than one school), leadership de-layering, the introduction of Regional Schools Commissioners[[1]](#footnote-1) and the re-regionalisation of the inspectorate. Governance structures, too, have undergone change with the introduction of non-executive management groups, trust boards and multi-school governance. Chapman et al. (2009) suggest that only federations specifically designed to improve failing schools – where a stronger school takes on responsibility for a weaker one – outperform schools in a control group of non-collaborating schools. This narrow group of schools that change structures, leadership and governance for a single purpose and in a particular set of circumstances tend to see the benefits of this collaboration. The field of study on which this thesis is based could be argued not to share these characteristics of weak and strong school. Added to this is the paradoxical situation where, in a competitive market, collaboration is expected and seen as good practice – and indeed is required due to external pressures (such as area reviews of provision and financial constraints) in some circumstances. The long-fused 1988 Education Act is only now, arguably, beginning to fully ‘bite’ the education sector in terms of the implications of fuller marketisation, competitiveness and consumer choice (Muijs and Rumyantseva 2013).

# 2.5 Marketisation and privatisation

These policy ideas continued post-2010. We continue to see the notion that competition raises standards, that market forces improve standards in schools. The Conservative Party’s 2010 manifesto showed how these market forces would be realised in the current system, outlining the new groups who can form and run schools (free schools), models of school ownership (brokerage and rebrokerage of academies to new sponsors), with parental choice and competition between schools at the heart of all this. The 2017 manifesto made claims as to the success of education policy since 2010:

“We are proud of our reforms to education, which are giving millions of children a better start in life than they could have expected a decade ago. Thanks to our school reforms – such as the establishment of free schools and academies, and changes to ensure a rigorous curriculum – there are more good and outstanding schools today than ever before.” (Conservative Party Manifesto 2017, p49)

Like Ball (2009), Allen (2015) identifies the paradoxical situation of seemingly radical and neoliberal values, further distilling of what ‘market forces’ mean in education. He shows how they operate through a host of systems, juxtaposed against the increasingly traditional approaches signaled by control mechanisms such as the revised national curriculum, a call for a classical education, the introduction of coercive data mechanisms to leverage change on the micro level of the school (the English Baccalaureate, attainment 8 and progress 8) and further changes to the inspection system (Allen 2015). This continuing and furthering of a neoliberal agenda leads to a requirement for new ways with which to conceptualise the change that has taken place in the English school system since 2010.

**2.6 Conceptualising academies**

Commentators have theorised the academies movement in a range of diverse ways. This range represents the complexity of the field, alongside the rapidity with which political change has shifted the emphasis of academisation from its early aim of promoting the breaking of cycles of social inequality in inner city areas (Woods et al. 2007), which involved a relatively small number of schools, to mass academisation post-2010.

Some of these earlier lenses through which to conceptualise the academies movement in England are, arguably, of limited use in contemporary circumstances. For example, Woods et al. (2007) examine the nature of entrepreneurialism in education. They identify the proportion of academies sponsored by business, charities, faith groups and other bodies, drawing parallels between the different sorts of entrepreneurialism found in the business world and those being found in education.

As the academies system in England matures, this earlier model of sponsorship has shifted significantly. Not only did converter academies (those who become academies, not through forced academisation because of failure but through choice and without a sponsor) not need to have sponsorship to enjoy the purported freedoms and benefits of academisation, but the new landscape of education has within it entrepreneurialism at the academy chain level, with individual headteachers, executive headteachers and chief executive officers (CEOs). It could be argued that, currently, the capital and entrepreneurial expertise is limited to: those schools already in an academy trust which is sponsored; or to the knowledge and of those already working in the field of education, converting schools to academies, or schools sponsoring other schools when they are forced into academisation. Thus, the argument that the outside world (those groups with expertise perhaps missing from the education system) was to have a profound impact on the English system is lost. In a self-improving school system (Hargreaves 2014), schools are ‘doing it for themselves’. This is to be expected as the system matures and develops and as the original mission of academisation pushes forward the neoliberal agenda system-wide.

Godfrey (2017) paints a much more pessimistic view of the self-improving system than that of Hargreaves or indeed than that presented in the White Papers of 2010 (‘The importance of teaching’) and 2016 (‘Educational excellence everywhere’). While the rhetoric of the self-improving system which promotes teachers doing (and deciding, through their professional judgement, expertise and action research) ‘what works’, the reality is that leaders are dictated to in terms of which evidence is to be trusted and which not. Godfrey’s conclusion is that leaders should be guided by values, rather than being led by evidence, for it is the values-driven *interpretation* of evidence that leads to positive decisions for pupils. The idyll of the self-improving system is, arguably, not a given in the education system, even after decades of policy that appears to offer leaders more freedom.

Ball and Junemann (2011) view the changing landscape through the lens of philanthropy. They regard the fundamental shift from state control to a wide range of actors who have an impact on the education system across the public, private and voluntary sectors as complete, and philanthropy as just one of the range of ways in which the new landscape can be understood. They paint a picture of a complex network of actors in the control of public systems such as education, calling this ‘network governance…post-bureaucratic state’ (ibid) Their conceptualisation is further realised in their assertion that there has not been a wholesale movement away from traditional state control but a new, hybrid, complex and contradictory state of affairs. They aptly paint this picture of complexity, accepting that the lived experiences of schools (and indeed, other parts of the state apparatus) are the traditional ways of conceptualising them. Thus, individual schools and trusts sit in a shape-shifting world where their place, power and inter-relationships with other parts of the system are elusive and somewhat contradictory.

Some of the earlier critique of the academies movement focused on ownership and accountability. Beckett (2011) bemoans the removal of oversight of academies from the Charities Commission while Gunter (2011) focuses on who ‘owns’ academies, the role of sponsors, democracy, and choice for parents. What is missing from this critique is a picture of how school collaboration developed post-2010 in many areas of England where there were no sponsors but very localised groups of schools coming together to collaborate. In these sponsor-free collaborations, it could be argued that there is a vacuum in terms of knowledge about how relationships work and the dangers and positive aspects of such relationships where state control is weaker.

What Ball and Junemann (2011) so accurately describe is the paradoxical relationship between two networks: state control and the mish-mash of new bodies in control of schools, where there is loudly stated autonomy for schools to make their own decisions – alongside mechanisms to shape those decisions – in coexistence. Hatcher (2011), in one of the very few existing explorations of local school leadership’s response to school collaboration, sees this through the lens of Bernstein’s ‘framing’. He sees the governmental drivers of collaboration as ‘closed’ framing and terms the state and its local and private sector actors as ‘empowered’. In the face of huge local public concern, the state’s mechanisms and levers trump local democratic consensus. Although there are some descriptions of how changes to schools’ structures and collaborative arrangements work, the ‘system’ of local, regional and national actors is complex and contradictory, and evades a firm theoretical grasp in the context of English schools. Again, the notion of philanthropy as a lens to view the developing school system has been somewhat superseded post-2010 and with the increase in converter academies. Like entrepreneurialism, in many academies and MATs, the drivers and models to describe school-to-school relationships are local, contextual and personal. As the importance of sponsorship wanes in what is rapidly becoming a fully academised school system (because there are not enough sponsors for all schools to be sponsored (DfE 2014)), philanthropy as a theoretical lens has lost its currency. Newly formed school collaborations cannot be defined or adequately described using these lenses.

Ball (2010) outlines a host of ways in which private entities (consultancies, multi-nationals etc.) elide and becomes a part of the network of the public system, albeit an academised, ‘independent’ system, noting that privatisation is central to current educational reforms. He also argues that privatisation is not always the end but a part of the means. For Ball, the move towards privatisation of education and, indeed, the state, is inevitable. Ball argues and exemplifies ways in which government policy creates an improvement industry that mediates that policy at a range of levels, such as large international accountancy firms advising government on policy development, advising schools and families of schools locally on meeting government directives as a result of that policy, and locally running education improvement services across local areas.

Although these notions of multi-level privatisation are accurate in terms of private players in educational policy and service provision (similar to sponsorship), the involvement of business entrepreneurialism and philanthropy in the governance of schools, they are outdated in the current educational landscape. They fail to show the mechanisms through which different sorts of schools at a local level interact with larger organisations. Indeed, many latecomers to school federations, trusts and later MATs (such as converter academies post-2010), as a result of their never being in a category of concern, at risk or otherwise *requiring* academisation, will never have used any of these businesses in the running of their schools. It could be argued that they are unlikely to in the future.

## 2.7 Competition between schools

As discussed in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, the 1988 Education Act ushered in the beginnings of market forces on schools in the form of parental choice, the ‘competition’ being the mechanism of per-capita pupil funding. The more parents who choose to send their child to a particular school, the more that school is rewarded economically. A range of studies on the impact of competition on student outcomes (bearing in mind that ‘outcomes’ is a fluid and ill-defined concept) seem inconclusive (for example, Sandstrom and Bergstrom 2005; Clark 2005; Dronkers and Robert 2008). Clouding the issue further is the argument that, since 1997, successive governments have promoted competition concurrently with collaboration (Chapman 2012; Muijs and Rumyantseva 2014).

‘The Importance of Teaching’(DfE 2010) lauds the positive impact of collaboration, saying that: “Schools working together leads to better results” (ibid p60). However, what this White Paper does not spell out so clearly is that the underlying architecture of the collaborative system (academies) is the movement of power around the system to fewer actors in the form of ‘chains’ of schools where a single trust is in ultimate control. So, while Chapman (2010) argues that collaboration and competition have been encouraged simultaneously, this could also be argued not to be the case: the impact has been that early, looser collaborations have become the MATs of today. The collaboration could be argued to have been overtaken by market forces leading to systemic tensions and leaders unsure of how to position their schools in an ever-changing competitive environment.

So, while there has been a drive by the 2010 and 2015 governments for schools to better collaborate, there has also been a diversification and fragmentation of the school system in England that has led to heightened competition. For example, Armstrong and Ainscow (2018) argue that the current structure of the school system militates against collaboration in that it promotes autonomy. Added to this, the evidence for the positive impact of collaboration of student outcomes is, according to Ainscow, at best to be seen as mixed. The evidence for competition being the answer to an education system that has been labelled by policy-makers “…between awful and mediocre” (Cummings 2013) is weak, as is the evidence for collaboration being a remedy. Emerging from this, Muijs and Rumyantseva (2014) began to explore the concept of ‘coopetition’ – organisations where competition and collaboration co-exist – to describe this current phenomenon in schools. However, there are very few studies of coopetition specifically in education (Armstrong and Ainscow 2018).

**2.8 ‘Coopetition’**

Bengtsson and Kock (2014) term the seemingly polarised phenomenon of cooperation and competition coexisting as “coopetition”. They define (while accepting that an uncontested definition is presently unavailable) this as the phenomenon of cooperation and competition happening at the same time. In the same way that large corporations, through globalsation and developments in technology in a period of late modernity, find themselves in increasingly “…dynamic and complex business contexts” (p180), schools inhabit this complex space in that they operate in some ways in a market and in other ways not. In this period of complexity, which has been further compounded by many challenging contextual factors such as continuing austerity, schools are having to collaborate, while finding themselves in competitive situations at the same time – what Bengtsson and Kock term the “coopetition paradox” (p183). Traditional notions of school leadership, of leading a single organisation and ‘headship’ being about pupils’ learning first and foremost have been superseded by ‘system’ leadership. The traditional bodies supervising and controlling schools (LAs) are in rapid decline and indeed, national policy cites collaboration (DfE 2010, for example) as one of the keys to the future success of the education sector.

The literature on coopetition offers much to the current thinking on the education sector in England. What is missing from the coopetition literature are well documented models of the “dynamics of coopetitive interaction” (ibid p184) and the development of theory and practice in the management of coopetition related to schools. That said, schools have not yet even grasped the paradoxical concept of coopetition in that the discourses surrounding collaboration and cooperation are often about deleting competition (Hargreaves 1996; Datnow 2011), something which the underlying architecture of the system in England will not allow. As Tidstrum (2014) suggests, if the mechanisms of coopetition’s benefits to institutions can be clearly mapped out, the field would be benefitted, and light could be shed on the factors that lead to good outcomes in coopetitive relationships between schools, especially as these relationships become more prevalent.

It is important to identify the forces that are pushing schools together and the ones keeping them apart to fully understand coopetition in an educational context. Raza-Ullah et al. (2014) suggest that cooperation and competition can be visualised as a yin-yang in that it has an external boundary of varying strength and an internal boundary of varying strength. The interest for educational researchers lies in the strength of the external boundary, the size between internal boundaries and their permeability. The external boundary draws organisations together and in the creation of the internal and external boundaries, the paradox is activated. Raza-Ullah et al. also offer a helpful conceptual model of coopetition in practice by drawing attention to the context of the coopetition and its impact on the nature of the paradox, and then the resultant tension in the coopetition. Where the external pressures pushing institutions together becomes stronger in relation to the internal boundaries, the paradox dissipates. If the external pressure weakens, the gap widens and the paradox increases in its pertinence.

The application of this concept to the educational sector in England might seem obvious to some, though the specifics of what the external factors are, their relationship to the internal factors and the interplay between the two are, as yet, not defined in any literature. This will be discussed later in this thesis. The levels of impact that the different internal and external factors have on the school’s system is of key concern given the impact of these factors on the success of school-to-school collaboration.

As discussed above, educational examples of the ways in which coopetition as a theoretical model is realised in England are very scarce because the number of studies that involve the perspectives of those working in schools under the conditions of coopetition are few and those that do exist are partial. For example, Armstrong and Ainscow (2018) suggest that their paper offers ‘views from the inside’ when in fact it offers the views of those leaders paid by central government to deliver school-to-school support and the writers were, by their own admission, in the pay of the government to write research papers on the topic. Their conclusion that schools are willing to organise and, indeed capable of organising peer-to-peer support regardless of the policy and structural factors militating against this could be argued to be flawed and to be based on one side of the picture and on a very limited sample. Their paper offers a tiny, tantalising glimpse of a rich seam of evidence about how coopetition might work in its reference to system actors (such as LAs and individual schools) that find themselves on the outside of the small number paid overtly to offer school-to-school support. One respondent to their study suggested that many problems in schools now stem from a lack of clear roles and responsibilities of the various actors in the system, all of whom are trying hard to define their own roles in a poorly structured system. This ambiguity of the roles and responsibilities of actors within the network, and the almost total lack of the voices of school leaders in the literature in response to the tensions between competition and collaboration, lead to the need for a theoretical tool to understand the already-existing network.

## 2.9 Networks

An underused but nevertheless important tool in researching the power and agency of school leaders is actor–network theory (ANT). ANT is problematic as an approach with which to study in social sciences, not least because its status is not well defined. Law (2014) describes ANT as a “family” of tools for analysis, linguistic and semiotic tools, used to understand the meaning of signs and symbols and tools for analysis the relevance of artefacts and their meaning. Usefully, for the study of complex human systems, ANT sees no distinction between human and non-human ‘actants’, and while human actors are easy to define, non-human actors and their relationships to human actors warrant some further discussion.

ANT argues that humans exist and exert influence not merely on other humans but in a social ecosystem (Dwiatama and Rosin 2014). A full understanding of these social ecosystems is reliant on analysis of the power, agency and relationship between different actants and takes us beyond human intentionality to show the impact of non-human actors in a network. For education, these would be things like the economy, markets, government, ideas, ideology and material actors such as buildings. In ANT, the non-human actors are not merely the intentional manifestations of the actions of humans (although they are often created by groups of humans), but take on life and agency of their own, independent of human interference. Ross and Berkes (2013) also assert that the notion of ‘agency’, an actant’s ability to impact other parts of a network, should be broadened to include the agency of social groups, so that a group is seen as an actor within the network. Human agency loses its ultimate power in this view, and ANT helps us understand how various entities are structured positionally, one related to another, and how they affect one another (Mifsud 2014). This study focuses on what might be called a network (of schools), but ANT, while acknowledging this network, takes us much further than a description of the relationships between these schools, to see the network in terms of individuals, institutions, the physical locality, and society.

Mifsud describes ANT as: ”messy, fluid, disorderly, dynamic, chaotic and ambivalent…” (2014 p2) and identifies these attributes as the very things that make ANT a key, underused “sensibility” in educational research. The description of ANT as a sensibility as opposed to a methodology could be argued to weaken its power as a research too. This sensibility is key to ensuring that, when research becomes real–when this sort of social research is actually happening on the ground–ANT is much more appropriate than many other methods would be.

## 2.10 School leadership: a new landscape

Leadership abides as a key concept throughout the discourses of school quality. It emerges from Ofsted frameworks (envisaged as a control mechanism in a neoliberal sense) and in the thinking of government as a key factor in school effectiveness and improvement (Ofsted 2019). If culture is the means of a school’s efficacy (Gunter 2011), then leadership is the vehicle to produce the culture that improves effectiveness (Gunter and Forrester 2008).

**Throughout a period of change in English schools, concepts of leadership have changed, as have the nature of the bodies ultimately leading schools. There has been a significant move from single schools that are held to account by governing bodies formed of volunteers (including parental representation) to academy ‘chains’ containing a number of schools to multi-academy trusts (MATs), as the academies programme has taken hold. Fiske (2017) describes the academies programme in England as moving schools away from their concern with local priorities as the governance of these schools moves from local to regional or even national control in the form of ‘non-geographical MATs’: trusts that have schools spread across a wide area. The National Governance Association (NGA) describes the changes to school governance as “nothing short of a revolution” (NGA 2017 p4). During this revolution, the NGA has accepted that the “constant refrain’ of governing bodies has been that they are “making it up as [they] go along” (ibid). The changes to school structures and leadership have, arguably, not been matched with training or clear direction of school leadership at a local or national level. For the NGA, concerns currently include the emergence of wholly self-governing MAT boards (with no representation from the communities they serve), a lack of governance expertise on MAT boards and a lack of understanding of the changes to school governance (ibid pp8-10). It is arguable that the knowledge of those in the ultimate leadership positions of schools (in the case of academies, the trustees and members) has not kept pace with the changes to the sector in many groups of schools.**

**A range of theorists have argued that the importance of school leadership in the form of headteachers cannot be understated (for example, Leithwood et al. 2006; Bush and Glover 2014). Yukl (2002, cited in Bush and Glover 2014) argues that defining leadership is arbitrary and subjective. That said, Bush and Glover’s working definition outlines three main features of leadership: influence, values and vision. Within these three dimensions are a host of models or typologies of leadership which Bush and Glover helpfully collate.** Though leadership in education has been described as ‘second only to classroom teaching in its impact on student learning’ (Bush and Glover 2014 p3), it should not be taken for granted that leadership as an important concept should forever be so very important to state education.

# 2.11 Sustainable leadership

Often, conceptualisations of what leadership *is* depend on underlying conceptualisations of what education is *for*. Hargreaves (2007) proposes a novel version of school leadership that is based on a nuanced view of education in a late modernity being “an enrichment of life” (ibid p225). From this concept of leadership come Hargreaves’ ‘seven principles’ ofsustainable leadership matters: leadership outlasting individual leaders; the spread of sustainable leadership; and leadership that does no harm; that actively improves the surrounding environment; that promotes cohesive diversity; that develops and does not deplete material and human resources; and that honours and learns from the best of the past to create an even better future.

Hargreaves’s sustainable leadership is about school leadership that enables education to survive “amidst the chaos of change preserving and renewing its long-standing purposes…” (ibid p227), which is in stark contrast to the executive system leadership described by Fiske as: “break[ing] the traditional link between school and community [with academies having] few, if any roots in communities…MATs may have organisational interests that directly conflict with those of their member academies…a system of academies weakens…traditional social impact” (2017 p35). So, for Fiske, the notion of leadership being nourishing and sustaining for the system (as Hargreaves envisages) has been superseded as a result of the development in school structures – notably academisation.

This new vision of leadership prevalent in discussion about schools is ‘system leadership’, based on ‘system thinking’: a novel way of understanding social systems in the 1940s. Shaked and Schechter (2014) describe it as a concept that is emergent in terms of education. They (along with Leithwood et al. 2019) argue that no single accepted definition of it exists. Normally characterised as within the transformational leadership styles (ibid), system leadership involved taking all aspects of school life and seeing them as inter-related, parts of a wider socio-political system within which educational reformation is a desirable end goal. Shaked and Schechter’s study (2014) found that system leaders in education view education as a whole system, adopt a multi-dimensional view of education and seek leverage for change in different parts of the system. Their description of system leadership is based on a wide range of empirical knowledge from across a range of disciplines. System leadership literature which is situated solely within literature on education specifically tends to have a much more clearly defined role in transforming education. That said, Hartley (2010) argues that system leadership turns away from the transformational paradigm.

For the most part, system leadership in literature about education is about leaders’ influence across more than one school through a leader having a responsibility across schools in positions such as executive headship, distributed leadership or school-to-school support (Simon 2015; Gunter, Hall and Bragg 2013). Fullan (2005 cited in Simon 2015) claims that system leadership brings about school improvement: “…schools are more likely to improve if they innovate collaboratively; such collaboration is empowering for the schools involved; reform which is system-led, is more likely to be sustainable over time” (p545). Simon summarises the importance of system leadership to education by saying that it allows for greater flexibility, that system leadership allows a synergy to emerge where the sum is more than the parts and that the collegiality involved in system leadership leads to improved standards across schools. Of course, Simon’s vision of system leadership relies on a system to lead. The ‘system’ is argued by Greany (2015) to be both fragmented and networked simultaneously, and under-researched (ibid).

Some have described system leadership in more negative ways: as the function of changing power dynamics, increased competition, power over schools falling into the hands of fewer individuals, and the de-democratisation of schooling. For example, Hartley (2010) sees these new concepts of system leadership in education not as a way in which synergy can be created for the good of educational improvement but as an attempt to: “ease the burden on overworked teachers” (p274). Harley also suggests that system leadership, while purporting to be a “weakening of hierarchical control” (so, the control of the state weakening or the increased democratisation of school leadership, increased power of leaders over the system), could actually be a means of simply delivering a governmental goal (ibid p277).

There are evangelical advocates of system leadership in education. Hill (2010) in the “first time that this issue has been studied in depth” (ibid p4) speaks of the “partnership dividend” (ibid p7) and points to Chapman and Muijs’s (2009) research as affirmation for leadership across schools having a positive impact on ‘performance’. Although Chapman and Muijs were careful to point out that their findings are tentative and in no way conclusive and that there were no causal connections that could be drawn, Hill takes their findings to mean that the impact of federation is most pronounced where the specific aim of a federation was to draw together high and low-performing schools. Bush and Glover’s (2014) view supports this and suggests that system leadership is in an early phase of development in education and that while there are many proponents of system leadership, evidence for its efficacy is slim.

# 2.12 Defining school collaboration

Chapman and Muijs (2013) set out a “typology of federations” (federations that are any collaborative group of schools.) These typologies were arrived at using the publicly available information about the schools involved. These types of relationships were: ‘cross phase’ (different phases collaborating), ‘performance’ (higher and lower performing schools collaborating), ‘size’ (schools with different sizes collaborating), ‘mainstreaming’ (where special schools combine with mainstream schools), ‘faith’, and ‘academy’ (where a number of academies collaborate).

For Chapman and Muijs, these six types often overlap. Sometimes, federations elude any classification. In 2013, academy federations were the least prevalent. It is likely that they are now the most prevalent of federations. What are still missing from the literature are the voices of school leaders, clues as to the inner workings and developments of these federations, and the “conditions under which federations can be successful” (Chapman and Muijs 2013 p388). Chapman and Muijs go on to say that there are significant gaps in knowledge in terms of the nature of power in these relationships and the impact of accountability mechanisms on leaders’ actions.

This review of relevant literature demonstrates that there are some significant gaps in knowledge about the impact of collaboration in all its forms (collaboration, federations, academies and MATs) on schools and school leaders when they embark on any sort of collaborative relationship. Questions remain about what ‘system leadership’ means in school collaborations. There is a lack of understanding of power relationships and the impact of accountability mechanisms within school collaborations. There is much more exploration to be done in mapping the actors involved in school collaborations and explaining the ways in which they interact to produce whatever change emanates from collaborative relationships. There is little exploration of the impact of the ‘dynamics’ involved in coopetition in general, and this gap in knowledge is magnified as coopetition research in schools is very limited. The typologies of collaborations are not met with rich, school-level analyses of how they impact leaders in schools and their decision-making.

**2.13 Conclusion**

So, over time, school structures have changed considerably. Market forces could be argued to have created a situation of competition, whereas some more recent educational policies have pushed forward collaboration as a mechanism for school improvement and enhanced school effectiveness. However, school effectiveness is a fluid concept, and research on the impact of leadership on school-level policy and therefore effectiveness, though saturated with literature, is lacking specific explanations of coopetition and network actors on the system. Through the methodology that follows, findings in chapter 4 and discussion in chapter 5, I contribute to knowledge in this area.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

**3.1 Introduction**

*This chapter begins by positioning my research as an ethno-case study, arguing that the form of the research falls between two research designs: ethnography and case study. It goes on to discuss ontology and epistemology, justifying the qualitative nature of the research design. My positionality as an embedded researcher is considered. This leads to a discussion on reflexivity as an essential element of work as an embedded researcher. I go on to show how data were collected, discuss the limitations of the methods and then outline in detail how interview questions were formed, ‘critical incidents’ created and other data captured. The chapter ends with a discussion about sampling, risks and ethical considerations.*

**3.2 Research design**

The form of this research falls somewhere between an ethnography, a case study and narrative research; approaches which it could be argued are similar. It analyses participants’ lived experiences within their communities, communities that I was, at times, a part of (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2015). I was also, at times, a participant in the field in which I was studying and some of the data is from my own professional observations. The research design is qualitative and attempts to describe culture, patterns of cultural behaviour, relationships and networks with the aim of setting the data within the context I studied. However, there were elements of methodology that had the hallmarks of a case study approach in that the analysis sought to highlight the experiences of participants to illustrate more general points about the field (Creswell 2018). I made deliberate attempts to ‘detach’ myself through the methods I employed (discussed below, 3.5), and while some of the data collected were iterative and ongoing, the interviews were planned, semi-structured and finite, and data came from multiple sources (Arthur et al. 2012). However, through the medium of interviews, participants regularly shared narratives. While this research did not set out to take the form of narrative research, some of the data collected took a narrative form and, therefore, the analysis of data had to take this into account.

Perhaps the closest recognisable research design to that used for this research is the ethno-case study. Parker Jenkins (2018) problematises ethnography and case study, arguing that research *can* take this hybrid form. For Parker Jenkins, between ethnography and case study there is a ‘fine line’ and there is already much overlap when considering existing definitions. In reference to my research, as mentioned above, while much time was spent in the field, I took clear steps to keep ‘distance’ when undertaking research. Although describing the culture in the collaboration could be argued to be an ethnographic approach, I also drew out key themes and issues in the case. And as a natural part of the interviews, participants shared stories which are re-told in this thesis (narrative research) but used to describe the culture (ethnography) and draw out key issues (case study). Of these three qualitative approaches, I set out to use a hybrid of two: ethnography and case study. The subsequent use of narrative analysis was as a result of the form the data took as they were collected. Therefore, I do not claim that this study employed a narrative research approach but I do acknowledge that some of the hallmarks of narrative research are present. So, this thesis presents a detailed ethno-case study of a group of schools undergoing profound structural change as they became in turn a ‘soft federation’, a ‘hard federation’, academies and then a MAT. It analyses the relationships between various school leaders in this change process as they navigated their respective schools through turbulent times, both locally and nationally (see literature review: privatisation, 2.3). It aimed to answer the following research question:

How do school leaders perceive the challenges of school-to-school collaboration and what does this tell us about:

* how the network of actors in school-to-school collaboration might be described and understood, and
* how coopetitive tension manifests itself in school-to-school collaboration, and
* the perceived impact of leaders’ actions in school-to-school collaboration.

The thesis investigates the perceptions held by school leaders about the challenges of school federation, and how these perceptions lead to a range of actions, decisions and personal/political dynamics. There has been little research done into the deep structural changes in schools in England at the individual school-cluster level. While not attempting to establish the impact of leaders’ actions on school outcomes such as pupils’ examination results, this thesis does explore the impact of leaders’ actions on themselves, each other and the relationships between the schools.

**3.3 Epistemology, ontology and positionality**

It is always important to reflect on one’s own positionality when embarking on academic study (Coglan and Brydon-Miller 2014), because positionality affects all elements of the research process. In addition to one’s epistemological stance, positionality strongly informs the context of the study. This thesis seeks to contribute to the understanding of collaboration in education by drawing out school leaders’ perceptions of collaboration and establishing the impact of these perceptions on the network. As such, it seeks to understand the social world.

There are many factors which affected how I approached research design, not least my own ontological and epistemological positions. This research sought to capture the voices of the participants, analyse these voices alongside other data, and develop a deeper understanding of the social phenomenon being studied. As such, I take a relativist rather than a realist position in that I propose that this work offers a new interpretation of ‘truth’ as opposed to there being a single, fixed ‘truth’ that exists independently of the meaning *created* through this research. This is not to say that there are multiple realities that make no single ‘truth’ useful, but to acknowledge the assumption that the social world can be adequately understood through a constructivist, interpretivist approach. Although an interpretivist approach might attempt to distance the researcher as much as possible to limit the researcher’s own impact on the field of study, I did not have the ability to fully distance myself as an embedded researcher. Therefore, reflectivity was an important part of my research practice, consistently exploring the ways in which my position affected my interpretation. From an interpretivist position flowed the choices about research design. Punch (2011) suggests that it is the nature of the data (driven by the nature of the research question) that leads to initial decisions about the use of qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods in any particular study. To answer the first research question in this study requires a representation of participants’ perceptions. As such, it is participants’ voices that need to be drawn out. This leads to a natural qualitative approach because the data to be collected leads the research design in that direction. However, as Punch points out, there is more to the distinction than merely whether words or numbers are being gathered as data.

**3.4 Embedded researcher**

During the time that I was collecting data, my status and position in the field of study – the federation – changed significantly (see figure 3.1). Over the time of the completion of the thesis, my role changed from someone interested in the phenomenon of school-to-school collaboration, to someone involved in informal collaboration, to one of three staff involved in work across schools in a formalised collaboration (a soft federation, then a hard federation, then finally a MAT).

Figure 3.1: Researcher positions

McGinity and Salokangas (cited in Rowley 2014) define embedded research as:

“…a mutually beneficial relationship [which] typically provides the researcher with greater access to the host organisation/group with benefits for collecting data and research funding…the relationship provides the host organisation/group with a bridge to academia and academic knowledge, networks and critical approaches…” (p19).

This mutual benefit was acknowledged by the executive principal of the federation, who openly supported my research. He also took part in it and encouraged others to do so also. That said, the host organisation (the hard federation), which in 2013 became my employer, did not contribute to the fees for the Professional Doctorate. There was no formal agreement with the organisation, but an agreement in writing from the executive principal and each participant in the study. Formal presentations of my findings were never sought, and at times would not have been welcomed. As such, my position was one of awkwardness, and not entirely that suggested in McGinity and Salokangas’s (2014) definition. I did not enjoy the status of researcher in the organisation, because this role was secondary and seen as a personal one. I was not allowed any time to research, for example. Rowley (2014) suggests that for an embedded researcher, the binary ‘insider/outsider’ roles are blurred. This was certainly the case. However, the term ‘embedded’ fits my position well, so it is the word used here. I adopted an embedded researcher approach because, at the point of data collection, I was a part of the cross-school team. Taking this approach enabled me to work in a perpetually reflexive way, continually evaluating the impact of my insider status on the data I was collecting and taking steps to mitigate the potential effects of having a narrowed viewpoint.

During my time as an embedded researcher, I faced a number of ethical issues, the main one being that I was privy to a large amount of sensitive information. Access to some of this information came from my professional role and my role as a member of the executive team. It was not gained through my own, separate study. My response to this was to ensure that the information within this thesis was only gained through the specific methods discussed in this chapter (for example interviews): from publicly available documents, documents available to all staff in the federation, or documents or information for which I had expressly gained approval to analyse for a part of this study.

**3.5 Reflexivity**

Given that educational research creates a “high degree of complexity”, Williams (2009) suggests that research practices are “not adequately served by codes, compliance or custom, but “character…the personal identity of the researcher as social actor formed through attention to the reflexivity of the researcher” (p212). This involves research ethics codes and guidelines being “backgrounded” (ibid), though by no means being dispensed with, the researcher taking a dynamic stance, consistently reviewing the ethical guidelines alongside situational moral considerations, balancing the two, and “[prioritising] which principle takes preference” (ibid). Bosk (in Williams 2009) identifies the extra linguistic, non-dialogic nature of response to ethical dilemmas in the field: “More often than not, the entire sequence of dilemma-hesitation-action is completed before I am able to articulate fully what happened” (p214). Although presenting a challenge, it was not a cognitive one but a moral one; one which I was well placed to meet given my previous career history as a senior leader in a school: I had the pre-requisite moral stance and institutional sensitivity to research in a reflexive way. A situation when reflexivity is most important is in that of ‘aporia’. Williams discusses this in the context of “guilty knowledge”. Of particular interest in the case of research in the context of one’s own school are the aporia of the “agency of subjects, identity transgressions” (p215), “multi practitioner roles” (p216) and the aporia of “confessional space” (p218). For example, there were times when the participants, having given informed consent, did not necessarily understand the impact of their contributions. Sometimes, they were not concerned about their own anonymity. There were also times when they might have thought that I was using others in a utilitarian way for the furtherance of my own qualification: “using the research as a vehicle for status…professional advancement” (Cohen et al. 2008 p125). Research participants also retracted statements, requested deletions or requested that certain key parts of research data be suppressed. Given the context of the study, there were occasions when “conventional custom [in ethics proved] to be necessary but not sufficient” (Williams 2009 p215). It was also possible that I was subjected to a “deliberately [engineered] situation” used as a “trust test” (Cohen et al. 2008 p125). Although the above arguments raise the heightened ethical issues in researching in a sensitive context, this very sensitivity is an integral part of the ‘problem’ to be studied, a key driver of the change in the relationships between the schools and a potential limiting factor for the success of the change (insofar as the aims of the changes are realised). Therefore, the benefits outweighed the risks, and a deep sense of and profound commitment to reflexivity on my part as a researcher limited these risks sufficiently.

**3.6 Sample**

The sample was purposive (Punch 2011) in that it covered all of the schools involved in the federation and aimed to collect data from all of those involved in the leadership of the federation at three levels: governance, the executive team and senior teams (see figure 3.2). In involving a sample of all of those in the top three tiers of leadership, the study could account for the views of all those in leadership positions. However, it was not possible to access all of those operating at leadership tiers two and three in the federation as this would have made the sample unwieldy. There is, therefore, the potential for some voices, opinions and critical incidents not to have been accessed.

Figure 3.2: Tiers of leaders across the federation

In a single federation, the data are rich and highly contextualised: it is possible to see in a profound way the inter-relationships between the participants and their contexts. The aim of the thesis was not to draw wider macro-generalisations but to highlight the nuances and highly personal experiences of school federation that are missing from much of the existing literature. This made many of the findings very personal, sometimes emotive, and politically sensitive, which led to the need for deep consideration of the ethics of researching in this field.

At different phases of the data collection, different numbers of participants were interviewed. The initial phase of creating the questions involved the greatest number of participants, from all hierarchical levels and all schools. The aim here was to include the maximum number of participants and to capture the concerns of leaders at all levels. The interviews that followed involved only the most senior leaders.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Question formation (LEGO® Serious Play® ) (2014)** | **Interviews (1) (August 2014)** | **Interviews (2) (January 2015)** | **Post-script (2016)** |
| Executive team (including governance) | Executive head, chair of governors  | Executive head, chair of governors | Executive head, chair of governors | Chief executive officer |
| Miller Hall | Headteacher, assistant headteacher  | Headteacher | Headteacher |  |
| Corton High | Headteacher, assistant headteacher | Headteacher | HeadteacherEx-headteacher |  |
| Greenfield Primary | Headteacher, assistant headteacher |  |  |  |
| River Primary[[2]](#footnote-2) | Headteacher, assistant headteacher |  |  |  |
| Other |  |  | Leader of the ‘save our schools’ campaign’ |  |

Table 3.1 Research participants

**3.7 Data collection**

The collection of data was achieved through the following process, which is explained in detail in this section:

Figure 3.3: Data collection process

At the outset of the research, I was an embedded researcher through being an employee of the federation. In 2013, I established an informal collaboration group of senior leaders across the schools. I was then offered a formal role across two of the schools. This made my role as an embedded researcher both deeper and more complex. In the initial phases of research design, once I had narrowed down the research question, I was keen not to steer the direction of the findings by asking questions of my own making. I required a research method that allowed the themes to emerge from the field, ameliorating to some degree the potential for the narrow view that might be caused by my embedded status. As mentioned above in 3.1 (above), this reflexivity was an attempt to allow work in an interpretivist paradigm while maintaining acceptable levels of researcher distance, or ‘bracketing’ (Wade et al. 2009 p40). The consistent questioning of my position as an embedded researcher flowed through not only the analysis of the findings but also the research design, which initially took a visual-participatory approach. Examples of such participatory methods include the use of film watching, film making, art or writing (Mitchell et al. 2017) where participants are given a stimulus in a medium which allows the researcher to look on from a distance and the participants express themselves in ways that help the researcher answer the research question. Mitchell talks of using such approaches to create a safe space for participants to express themselves in recognisable mediums congruent to their own experiences. The use of such mediums raises participants’ consciousness, draws out their understandings and gives participants a voice (ibid). These participatory, visual methodologies further serve to allow participants to construct meaning independent of the researcher, where research participants’ prior understandings were fractured, ill-formed or incomplete (Mitchell 2012). These understandings are ripe for unpacking in subsequent interviews (ibid). Using a participant-led approach for the initial part of my research was an important part of ensuring that my role as an embedded researcher did not overly impact on the questions for the interviews. Had I formed the questions for these interviews through simply choosing the questions myself, I would, as an embedded researcher, have brought too much of my own knowledge and interpretation to those questions in advance of a fuller exploration of the field through research. An initially participant-led approach utilising visual methods enabled me to analyse issues that participants had not, themselves, fully processed cognitively (Pilcher, Martin and Williams 2015). Using visual methods also enabled participants to present ‘self’ and others not necessarily in a way that one could consider as ‘truth’ but as a participant’s construction of it (ibid)

While investigating research methods that provided limited researcher involvement, I came across some work by David Gauntlett. Gauntlett was using a business development package called LEGO® Serious Play® (SP) to do social research. The SP kits are boxes of mixed LEGO® pieces which facilitate adult ‘play’ while allowing collaboration, discussion and creativity in a business context. Before 2010, the package was available to licensed users only, but in 2010, Gauntlett developed an open-source version of the system. The system’s value comes from: its ability to ‘level’ participants; participants’ innate willingness to engage in play with recognisable objects; and the ability of participants to express themselves more deeply through play than through words alone. Gauntlett’s view that participants can be creative and communicate more comprehensively and more profoundly than in speaking alone was certainly borne out in my experience of using the LEGO® system in research.

I approached each of the school leaders and asked to meet them and one of their senior leaders. I chose not to disclose before the research what I was going to ask them to do, in an attempt to limit potential performance anxiety. It is right to say that a sound ethical stance involves participants having knowledge of what would be expected of them. However, in not disclosing the method that was to be used to collect this data, no risk to participants was caused. Not disclosing the medium in which participants would ‘work’ is not dissimilar from researchers not disclosing the specific questions that would be asked during an interview.

At the opening of the session, each team of headteacher and senior leader was presented with an information sheet which outlined the task (see figure 3.4 below and appendix 1 for the full version) and gave an example from the health sector of a completed task. I chose the health sector example so as not to steer the participants into a specific way of responding to the task.

Please build a model of the federation **as it is at this point.** You don’t need tobuild a physical representation, but a metaphorical one showing links [between schools], power, problems, barriers…

Figure 3.4: Initial task for participants

The specific question posed aimed to allow a full range of responses and gave four examples of what might be addressed: links between schools; power; problems; and barriers. I chose these four very broad themes because they were, according to my informal observations, the themes most discussed in inter-school meetings. As such, the initial starting point was of my creation, although in a very limited way. During the building of the model, participants discussed what they were building. This conversation elucidated the thought processes behind the building.



*Figure 3.5: LEGO® Serious Play® kit.*

Once the participants had built their model (when there had been a 15-second silence in the talk between the participants), the task was over and the participants were encouraged to finalise the task by discussing together the model they had created and the reasons for their building decisions. Although the models were then photographed, the pictures of the models themselves were of little value to the research; the process of building them was of more importance. I did not analyse the final model because this would have involved me applying a narrative to the models and would have therefore over-involved me in the narrative building, the narrative building which the participants had already done through the *LEGO® Serious Play®* process.

At the close of the session, Iasked the participants not to discuss the method with other schools, so that each group would approach the task ‘cold’, with less preconception and without extra time to form narratives in their minds before the session.

These initial sessions provided a rich starting point with which to question further each participant on themes that they themselves had identified. Also valuable were the comparisons, differences and similarities between the responses of leaders from different schools to the same task. Through reviewing the recorded conversations during these tasks, a list of key themes for further analysis during subsequent interviews was drawn up (see 3.8 below).

There is a developing body of research on how LEGO® can be used to help professionals explore complex organisational problems using the SP methodology (Antorini et al. 2013; Ackermann et al. 2009; Gauntlett et al. 2011). The methodology uses specially curated LEGO® kits that are designed to aid participants in expressing their thoughts. These kits are supplemented with a carefully facilitated methodology to assist participants in their efforts to explore organisational problems logically, in reasonable timeframes, and with the participation of a whole team of colleagues. The facilitated methodology is argued by LEGO® to be at the heart of the power of the SP process. The LEGO® SP kit is an eclectic mix of pieces from the LEGO®, LEGO® TECHNIC, and DUPLO ranges. At first glance, the pieces are not related and will not build anything coherent. This is one of the powerful aspects of the kits. The creations really will only come about with the hard work of the participants. That said, there are some obvious themes in terms of the items in the kits (for example, chests of money, pirates, superheroes, ladders, fences and windows, alongside a range of DUPLO animals of varying ferocity) and some distinct commonalities in the way teams tended to use them in their SP sessions.

Animals were often the pieces that participants picked up first. Usually, a team member picked out all of the animals, presented them to other participants and began a conversation about one of them being like a colleague. The kits include lions, tigers, elephants, bears, cats, dogs, birds and spiders in the kit. These sparked a lot of conversation on the 'king of the pride', 'prowling tigers' or 'wolves'. After establishing ‘characters’, participants set up a ‘canvas’ on which their creations would be formed. These were the LEGO® baseboards. There was implicit and explicit meaning even in the baseboards used by participants, with many attributing meaning to using, for example, sizes of boards to denote power or wealth of one of the schools, or colours of boards to denote the socio-economic areas in which their schools were placed (green being 'leafy' and other colours less so.) Other important components of the kit include bricks for walls, windows, doors and pre-made ladders. There are a variety of vehicles and landscape features, pirate treasures, spider webs and ropes to connect different parts of the creations. Participants used these elements creatively to build the world as they saw it, using metaphors made possible through the thousands of pieces provided (the kit contains nearly 4,000 pieces).

There are some underlying principles to the SP methodology that were important to my particular study. Kristiansen and Rasmussen (2014) suggest that the SP methodology has the potential to unlock human potential, especially because organisations are strategising. Strategising should be one of the most creative and imaginative acts in an organisation, according to Kristiansen and Rasmussen, but even in creative organisations, it is far from imaginative and creative. Given that the very nature of many organisational problems are to do with how different actors imagine the barriers to success, Kristiansen and Rasmussen argue that the SP system is an ideal method of allowing professionals to explore these barriers safely and creatively with other colleagues.

As previously discussed, this research was undertaken at a time of much restructuring in the schools which were a part of the study. This restructuring included compulsory redundancies of some of the research participants. The sensitivity of the topics to be researched were well served by LEGO® as a research tool. The LEGO® methods that I used gave full control of the narratives to the participants. This, in such a sensitive field, was an important way in which participants' initial consent was built into trust, demonstrated by the in-depth, revealing interviews that followed the LEGO® phase. During these sessions, I noted what the participants said as they created their models and recorded how the participants discussed their models. An emergent finding from this research is the importance of what is not discussed. Some of my findings cover things that had occurred but had never been talked about between the different participants. On some occasions, participants had realisations during interviews, discussed things in ways that they had not before thought of and were, themselves, surprised by their own insight, for example the new realisation that actors’ motives were benign when previously thought to be Machiavellian. The LEGO® phase of the research allowed me to see small threads of thought, for example in the movement or removal of a piece of LEGO®, or the choice or rejection of a piece to represent a colleague or an organisation. Fences were moved closer and then further away and multiple fences were built and discussed in terms of their comparative strength, for example. These seemingly unimportant actions allowed me to ask follow-up questions later in the interview process. For example, on one occasion, two participants had an extended discussion as to which animal in the LEGO® kit should be used to represent another employee. The participants disagreed. Eventually, they came to a conclusion through negotiation. They then went on to disagree about where this character should be placed according to his role, power and status. I then followed up with questions about the ways in which different participants view the power. This allowed the participants to reflect on the LEGO® sessions and discuss the ways in which they think about the views of others.

These are examples of the understandings that can be gained as a researcher. Through the LEGO® system the researcher can gain an insight into the complex layers of meaning as research participants explore their feelings about the social world in which they are an actor. The process of choosing pieces, building the models, adjusting the models, discussing the models and negotiating with others allows the researcher to see not only the thoughts of participants but patterns of thought, hierarchies of thoughts and even fleeting, discarded thoughts.

**3.8 Limitations of this method**

While the LEGO® method gave me the opportunity of gathering some complex data early on in the research process, it is not without its limitations. The SP system is an established business tool but not one that was known to any of the participants. Furthermore, only one of the participants had any experience of any similar business management/research tools. Other participants had heard of similar tools from a large, local multinational and had a negative view of them already. One commented:

“... oh God, I just don't do things like this, it makes me cringe. I'm a scientist ... it's just me, just the way my brain works.”

Another limitation was that I could not overtly use one part of the process at all, a part that proponents of the SP process would say is essential – that of the ‘facilitator’. LEGO® SP is argued to require a skilled and sensitive facilitator for the method to fully offer participants a chance to express themselves. Although I have facilitated SP sessions before, for me to have done this would have put me at the centre of the process – the very action that I was avoiding. The time that it would have taken for participants to complete the task would have multiplied at least five-fold because of the phases embedded into the full SP programme. To surmount this issue, I looked closely at the facilitator's role in the SP process to identify how I could fulfil these roles with limited overt involvement. According to Kristiansen and Rasmussen, the facilitator needs to fulfil the following roles in LEGO® SP:

1. ensure that all participants take part all of the time
2. ensure that all participants take part in all phases of the building of models
3. ensuring inclusivity for all participants
4. leading the group as a facilitator, not a consultant, trainer, teacher or instructor
5. facilitating a 100% democratic process where everyone’s voice is heard
6. giving people time to reflect and gather their thoughts

(ibid, 2014 pp49-50).

I had very little control over points 1–3 and 5. However, given the very small group setting, the fact that the building activity was being recorded, and the already strong relationships between participants in each group, in all cases but one, I surmised that interference from a facilitator would not be needed. Points 4 and 6 were embedded into the research design. Therefore, while not closely using the established SP model for the use of LEGO® for professional learning, many participants commented that the use of the SP system was an extremely positive experience. It also served the purpose of yielding rich data well.

Overall, the SP method allowed control of the narratives to be given almost fully to participants. It aided the underlying validity of the whole project because the questions to be investigated came from the participants themselves. It had the unintended consequences of allowing some leaders a time of catharsis and genuine exploration of their own feelings, something which meant that these participants were enthusiastic throughout all phases of the research process. The SP process mirrored the process by which the school leaders had developed their own worldview over time and slowed down their thought processes to open them to the researcher. From a researcher's perspective, the process allowed a large amount of complex, multi-layered data to be gathered very quickly. Finally, almost all participants said (in unsolicited comments at the end of the sessions) that while being presented with thousands of pieces of LEGO® was challenging at first, they enjoyed the experience of building the social world as they see it.

## 3.9 Forming interview questions

During the LEGO® SP sessions, I audio-recorded the conversations between participants. I also observed the conversations so that I would see the interplay between what was said and how the participants moved the LEGO® pieces around. This placed the discussions in their original context and avoided what Vaughan (in Arthur et al. 2012 p279) calls the “reduction” in conversations that are simply transcribed. I then performed a conversation analysis (CA) based around the concept that “knowledge manifests itself publicly in our utterances” (Ibid p275). The use of CA, is, perhaps, different from how CA might normally be used as a result of the purpose to which I was to put the data gathered. Normally, a researcher might be looking to account for the relationships between participants, how the structure of conversation adds to our understanding of the discourse, or the mechanics of turn-taking (Schleghoff 2002). Instead, I was utilising the conversations to identify broad themes that emerged in conversation around the topic in question. Following the initial LEGO® SP session, through looking at my notes and listening to the recording, I identified a set of themes that permeated the discussion. For each subsequent SP session, I either added to these themes if something new was discussed or noted another instance of the same theme being discussed. This resulted in a list of 20 prevalent themes (figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6: Themes in order of prevalence drawn from the recordings of discussions over the LEGO® Serious Play® kit

* Resistance
* Sabotage
* “Blood on the carpet”
* Gut (emotional) reactions from senior staff and others
* Isolation of certain schools at different times (and the way this is caused, maintained, broken down)
* A lack of alignment of anything other than business functions
* A lack of commitment to change
* A lack of emotional literacy of school leaders and governors
* A lack of intelligence (intellectual capacity) of leaders and governors
* A lack of student involvement in the federation
* The differing status, perceived status and self-perceived status of schools/leaders/staff (especially differing levels of leaders’ egos)
* Very slow pace of change
* Leadership personalities/styles at odds with each other and change
* What cannot be discussed/addressed and remains ‘an elephant in the room’
* Legacy/history of schools and individual staff
* Changing levels of institutional power when one governing body takes over
* A lack of ability to properly engage feeder schools
* The changing capacity of Miller Hall over time
* Wider landscape’s negative impact on collaboration (Ofsted, LA)
* Clarity of roles – direction, status

Following this, I reformed the themes into clusters (figure 3.7).

|  |
| --- |
| **Resistance, sabotage, hostility to change*** Resistance
* Sabotage
* Leadership personalities/styles at odds with each other and change
* A lack of alignment of anything other than business functions
* A lack of commitment to change
* The differing status, perceived status and self-perceived status of schools/leaders/staff (especially differing levels of leaders’ egos)

**Professional capacity, emotional reactions** * Gut (emotional) reactions from senior staff and others
* Leadership personalities/styles at odds with each other and change
* A lack of commitment to change
* Clarity of roles- direction, status
* The differing status, perceived status and self-perceived status of schools/leaders/staff (especially differing levels of leaders’ egos)
* A lack of emotional literacy of school leaders and governors
* A lack of intelligence (intellectual capacity) of leaders and governors
* A lack of student involvement in the federation

**Clarity of vision, roles, ego and status** * Changing levels of institutional power when one governing body takes over
* A lack of alignment of anything other than business functions
* Clarity of roles- direction, status
* The differing status, perceived status and self-perceived status of schools/leaders/staff (especially differing levels of leaders’ egos)
* A lack of intelligence (intellectual capacity) of leaders and governors
* A lack of student involvement in the federation

**Impact of the macro on the micro** * The changing capacity of Miller Hall over time
* Wider landscape’s negative impact on collaboration (Ofsted, LA)

**Victims (“blood on the carpet”)** * Blood on the carpet
* Isolation of certain schools at different times (and the way this is caused, maintained, broken down)

**Legacy issues*** A lack of commitment to change
* Legacy/history of schools, and individual staff
* A lack of ability to properly engage feeder schools
* What cannot be discussed/addressed and remains ‘an elephant in the room’

**Moot points- the elephant in the room, relative institutional power*** The changing capacity of Miller Hall over time
* Clarity of roles- direction, status
* The differing status, perceived status and self-perceived status of schools/leaders/staff (especially differing levels of leaders’ egos)
* What cannot be discussed/addressed and remains ‘an elephant in the room’
 |

Figure 3.7: Re-clustered themes from the LEGO® activity to the individual interviews. Clustered themes in bold.

I used the emboldened ‘clustered’ themes during subsequent interviews with each of the LEGO® task participants. These themes were ordered by their prevalence during the LEGO® discussions. The most prevalent was addressed first in the subsequent interviews. As opposed to posing a series of questions, interviewees were asked, for example: “Tell me about resistance, sabotage and hostility to change.” Participants were then free to speak about the themes and were asked not to speak on any theme which made them feel uncomfortable. Very little interviewer intervention was subsequently needed, and interviewees tended to cover most of the themes in a discussion that emanated from the initial theme.

As a result of there being so little interviewer input during interviews, and although all themes were covered in each interview, the themes were often spoken about obliquely by interviewees, or with more than one theme clustered together. For example, ‘the pace of change’ was often discussed alongside the notion of ‘sabotage’ and a ‘lack of commitment to change’.Therefore, having participants bring up themes themselves, and then interviewees discussing these themes in more detail, enabled a rich description, in response to the research question.

## 3.10 Research design and interview timing

The LEGO® SP tasks and the follow-up interviews were conducted over a 12-month period. A further interview with the new executive leader took place around a year later. While it is impossible to establish causal links between these contexts and the data, it is important to note the impact of the interactions between the personal and organisational context and its interplay with the gathering of the data.

To ensure participant availability, most of the LEGO® tasks and interviews were undertaken in the school holidays. This allowed interviews to carry on without the interruption of other meetings and facilitated greater levels of focus from participants. There were occasions when interviews took place after the retirement or redundancy of participants or close to the time of ‘critical incidents’. These critical incidents, which are discussed below, were those that took the organisation in a new direction. At times, these incidents were challenging, emotional and damaging to research participants. It could be argued that the proximity of interviews to these incidents had an impact on the data.

**3.11 Data analysis**

Once I had completed each interview, I transcribed each. Following this, I coded each comment against the key themes (see 3.9). I did not use any computer-assisted data analysis software because I felt that the quantity of data did not justify the use of such a system. I also had the key themes at the forefront of my mind while collecting and analysing the data. Although most of the data came from interviews, I also had access to a range of documentation, which added to my understanding of interview data. This included newspaper cuttings, documentation about the developing collaboration that was in the public domain, minutes of meetings and emails shared by participants.

Prior (2016) sees such documentary data in qualitative research not as a repository of information but as expressions of the views of the writers, akin to interviews. She outlines two main approaches to such documentation: document as ‘resource’; and document as ‘topic’. I utilised different approaches depending on the types of documents I was to analyse. I treated documents written by interviewees as ‘topic’ in that I focused on their content and how the documents were used as a resource by human actors for a particular purpose. For example, in the case of the early letter to parents about the new federation, I sought to understand how this document was *used* by actors by analysing the content, seeing how the document was assembled and how it generated social reality. I treated documents that were expressly intended to be repositories of information as such. In the case, for example, of governing body meeting minutes, the documents were treated as ‘topic’ in that the document was created to secure a record of conversations as opposed to for other purposeful ends.

In terms of the analysis of documents, the approach varied, again, according to the nature of the document. In building the history of the relationship between the schools in Corton, I used newspaper clippings to evaluate the strain on the relationships that had existed for decades. I used this, alongside interviews with key actors from the time of the newspaper articles and contemporaneously, to build a description of the relationships. I used other documentation to develop a deeper understanding of interviewees’ views. So, for example, where emails were shared with me, these were coded to the key themes in the same way that the interviews were coded (see 3.7 for information about how these themes were created and 3.9 for the list of themes).

## 3.12 Research design and the creation of ‘critical incidents’

The interviews were, clearly, each participant’s ‘take’ on the key themes. However, within these interviews, interviewees recounted a number of narratives. These narratives were told from their differing perspectives and there were elements from the narratives that the participants wove through their answers to the questions. A number of these stories were recounted by more than one interviewee. I have called these ‘critical incidents’. These were incidents that were raised by interviewees and presented as turning points or events which caused other incidents to take place. All presented as negative in nature, the timeframe of these critical incidents ranged from the 1980s through to the end of the data collection. In the initial analysis of the interviews, I logged as ‘critical incidents’ any incident that interviewees saw as key to the development or hindrance of the relationships between the schools in the federation and that were mentioned by more than one interviewee. The presentation of these critical incidents to the reader of this thesis was of key concern: these were stories, some over 30 years old, told by participants, each with a different and personal ‘slant’. The age of some of these stories and the number of times they seem to have been told appeared to have had a huge impact on how animated participants were when telling them, and of course different interviewees attributed different meanings to the events within these stories. Therefore, although their importance to the tellers was clear to me, to analyse and present them in the thesis was a challenge.

Critical incidents are presented in the thesis through the creation of a hybrid narrative account. Mifsud (2016 p865) terms this the “triple use of narrative”, which “allows [the researcher] to unravel the often-masked power flow circulating among educational leaders…”. Mifsud suggests that educational leaders use narratives to establish their own identities, to link together motive and action, and to make sense of their own and others’ actions. Leaders: “…construct and perform their identities” through these narratives (ibid p866). The creation of hybrid stories formed from information gained in interviews clearly presents some ethical and methodological dilemmas. The narratives, as presented in this thesis, have to allow the reader of the thesis to follow the thrust of argument, contribute to the answering of the research question, and be a defensively faithful representation of the truths proposed by participants in more than one account given in interview. It has to form a verisimilitude which gives it its validity (Webster and Mertova 2007). This is a “crisis of representation” (Flaherty et al. 2002) in which leaders “position themselves” (Mifsud 2016) though its value to the researcher in the way in which stories elucidate the sense school leaders are making of their professional and personal lives (Davies and Harre in Mifsud 2016 p866). In an open acceptance of the fact that the use of “fictionalising devices” position the researcher as producer, interpreter and playwright (ibid), Mifsud suggests that this sort of writing is a method of enquiry. Webster and Mertova (2007) see the use of narrative in research as a way of drawing together large amounts of data. Moreover, it allows for a very specific *sort* of data – stories of research participants – to be drawn together for analysis. For Mifsud, this drawing together is a form of inquiry and creates data. Far from being an inferior form of data collection, the collection of and creation of narratives provides a way in which a researcher can represent the events that have, according to research participants, been most influential.

Clough (2002) sees late modernity as a time when the nature of truth and truth production ought to be questioned. The use of narrative in education research, for Clough, is an attempt to “produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently” (St Pierre 1997 in Clough 2002 p4). The nature of the research I undertook in Corton required this relatively novel approach in that the complexity of human relationships and the interplay of the various actors with the wider system is “research of human significance” (ibid p4) that will always push and strain research methodologies to their limits, and in this case into relatively new places. The particular representational crisis faced in this piece of research is one identified by Flaherty et al. (2002), in that the location of truth, or meaning-making, could be argued to be in different places. Who decides what the critical incident data means? Is the site of truth-making the interviewee (and if so, which one)? Is it the interviewer through the questions they ask? Is it the point at which the data is drawn together into a narrative? Is it in the interplay between the critical incidents and the other parts of the thesis, or is the truth produced at the point of the reader’s digestion of the thesis? In reality, some truth-making emerges at all of these points. Flaherty et al. present us with a grand question: ‘On what basis … can one claim any authority to represent others ethnographically?’ (ibid p481) At the end of their paper, Flaherty et al. pose a series of questions about the future of ethnography and how ethnography can hope to solve the crisis in representation caused by these questions about postmodern approaches to a ‘fixed’ truth. One of these questions asks about the purpose of ethnographic approaches. Clough takes this further as one of his central arguments.

Clough (2002) argues that it is not the ‘how’ of narrative research presentation (seen as a subset of ethnographical research) that is of importance, but the why: what can narrative approaches to research hope to achieve that other methods cannot? For Clough, the researcher accepts that they *are* the architect of the narrative but holds in mind at all times that purpose and function of the narrative are the driving forces, not the form of the narrative. The purpose of the critical incidents in this thesis are to reflect the stories told by participants, to show the cited turning points in how leaders made decisions and, ultimately, to deepen the reader’s understanding of “life in familiar contexts…” (ibid p8). Ultimately, meeting these aims contributes to answering the research question. These persistent stories were a key and complex part of the process behind the dysfunctional relationship between the schools. More classical modes of research and analysis might not yield either the clarity to the reader of the thesis nor the depth of analysis needed to properly account for the phenomenon observed (Webster and Mertova 2007).

Recounting stories told by participants, even hybrid amalgams of these stories, presents a raft of ethical dilemmas. These are discussed in 3.14: ethical considerations.

**3.13 Validity and objectivity**

Validity and objectivity are, of course, key considerations for any researcher. While Mifsud does not feel the need to make a “methodological apologia” (2016 p877), I feel that the validity and usefulness of my research is diminished if I do not. All of the stories in this thesis are based on events that were reported in interviews. I visited the locations of each incident for the descriptions, and the descriptions of characters and their motivations and internal thought processes were written as they were reported to me during interviews. Verbatim quotes are used from the interviews and narratives are pieced together from more than one source. However, to aid anonymity and confidentiality, the final critical incidents are stories which *could* be true, rather than faithful representations of participants’ recounting. My ontological position and the needs of the field of study adequately account for this. In standard academic analytical writing, in exactly the same way as preparing a fictionalised account, writing will never be truth but a representation of such and humans are naturally ‘wired’ to make sense of their worlds through a tertiary application of narrative structure to events (Bruner in Dyson and Genishi 1994): it was abundantly clear that this was what the interviewees were doing. The narratives I created had an equal status to the analysis and straightforward presentation of findings, and they aimed to: “…strive for meaning enhancement rather than the reduction of uncertainty…” (Mifsud 2016 p867) and present critical incidents that take as their basis participants’ stories distil them into new stories that are ‘symbolic equivalents’ (Yalom in Clough 2002 p9).

Furthering this argument, Bruner (1994) identifies that, the most “ubiquitous” form of thought is not reasoned internal argument or overt understanding of one’s motivations, but stories – complex and interwoven sets of experiences overlaid with a whole host of meaning. These could be called “autobiographies” (ibid). For Bruner, stories do not happen – they are constructed. And the narrated self *is* the relational self (Miller and Mehler, ibid) in that internal narratives are the cause and basis of individual relationships with others. They cause action and form these relationships.

**3.14 Ethical considerations**

The thorough consideration of ethics in this investigation was of paramount importance. This field could be argued to be sensitive. As Cohen et al. (2008) argue, “ethics in sensitive research is different from ethics in everyday research in significance rather than range of focus” (p127). Aside from the usual ethical issues, which will be discussed later, the research field was political and fluid in that relationships between professionals had a major impact on the very changes taking place and the study, if not undertaken with both ethical issues and careful design in mind, had the potential to negatively impact the outcomes of the institutions’ plans for change. Simons (in Cohen et al. 2008) argues that in some cases, such research might not be worth the potential cost, because “the price is too high”: the outcome of negative findings in sensitive situations can “risk stifling educational research” (p126) system-wide. There is the potential in this particular area of research of the discovery of what Williams (2009) calls “guilty knowledge” – knowledge held through the research process by the researcher that has the potential to do harm to the study’s participants. For example, some of the interviews covered the preparation of formal disciplinary proceedings against a member of staff, the pay levels of staff and confidential meetings that had been held. Although this ‘guilty knowledge’ was an integral part of the description and explanation of phenomena (some of the most pertinent data collected was extremely sensitive in nature but helped answer the research question most fully), its discovery presented both ethical and methodological dilemmas. In discussing ‘guilty knowledge’, Williams uses the metaphor of a “…reef of utilitarian risk-benefit ethics…” (p212), an apt description in this particular situation. The presence of such information during the study certainly presented “complex dilemmas” (p214) and regularly led to moments of “aporia” (ibid p214.)

There are many ways of dealing with such sensitivities which avoid potential conflicts through the checking of information with research participants. While this avoids the possibility of releasing information in a thesis which research participants do not wish to be released, it also raises issues of validity and questions about whether policy elites are fully capable of understanding the potential negative impact of their disclosures. As will be mentioned in more detail below, this is particularly pertinent because of the emotional nature of some of the interviews. Although interviews were freely given, with written, informed consent, there were a lot of data that I decided not to consider as a part of the findings of this thesis.

Although the number of participants whose voices are heard in the findings is not extensive, the role of those voices in the network is. Therefore, each of their comments is followed by their job role and two letter initials related to their pseudonym. In addition, the findings chapter (4.3) contains pen portraits of each of the actors and the organisations for which they work. This is with the aim of enabling the reader to readily navigate the findings (4) and discussion (5) chapters. The pen portraits are of huge importance as a form of data management (Campbell et al. 2004). They provide a vignette (ibid p182) that is retained by the reader and locates the comments in their participant context. Campbell et al. discuss the fictionalisation of these pen portraits as a means of producing fictional characters, enabling information from different sources to be orchestrated into coherent accounts while maintaining anonymity. While anonymity was clearly important to my research, there were some sorts of participant of whom there was only a single representative. This made any sort of amalgam or anonymity less effective. As such, wherever possible, where it did not weaken any of the meaning of data, I adjusted the details of the pen portraits to further enhance the anonymity of participants. As a part of the university ethical approval, I also gained written consent from the executive headteacher of the federation for the research (see appendix 2).

**3.15 Risks of the study**

Due to the potential risks of the study, it was extremely important that the process of gaining informed consent made clear the goals, purpose and objectives of the research, the methods and the inherent limitations of confidentiality when research is undertaken in such a situation. I used ‘situation ethics’, consistently keeping the ethical considerations under review and dynamic in the background of all research activity. Williams (2009) calls this “reflexive responsibility” (p212). There are, of course, also limitations inherent in this approach, as it is reliant on the foresight and developed institutional knowledge of the researcher. There are two nuances to the “search for rules of conduct” (ibid) which were appropriate to this particular situation: that a dynamic, situation-dependent deliberation and judgement would lead to a proper ethical stance and that, in fact, research ethics lie not in deliberation and judgement but in the “character of the researcher as ‘trustworthy’, possessing the moral virtues of courage, honesty, concern for the wellbeing of the other, modesty about the intrinsic worth of the research, and humility…” (Pring in Williams 2009 p212). An awareness of the need for these facets of character was accompanied by consideration of the need to have, maintain and develop “context sensitivity” seeing the “ethic of care” as a “process of being…rather than an epistemological or methodological process” (p213).

**3.16 Confidentiality and interviewing vulnerable elites**

The sample for this thesis included a number of participants who could be termed ‘elite’ in their field. They included headteachers, executive headteachers, and chairs of governing bodies. While these participants were mostly not ‘elite’ on a national level (though one was), in the context of Corton’s educational system, they represented the top of the hierarchy. These positions bring with them levels and types of power and vulnerability perhaps not seen in participants lower in a system’s hierarchy. There is a growing body of literature on the involvement of elites in qualitative research and their specific vulnerabilities (Lancaster 2016; Grek 2011).

Lancaster identifies the reasons that elites are vulnerable in qualitative research: elites are often used to being more powerful than those around them; they often feel the need to ‘perform’ in front of a critical audience. Research can become ‘emotional’ as elites find themselves able to weave narratives in a safe space and as they begin to experience therapeutic effects of “an attentive and sympathetic listener”; the sort of listening that they are perhaps not used to (ibid p5).

These issues had to be borne in mind while keeping “faithful reporting of findings” (Lancaster 2011, p6) in balance. Confidentiality and anonymity are key issues, especially in a study with a small number of participants. They are even keener issues when interviewing “vulnerable elites” (ibid) While elites may be argued to have much power, when they are in an interview situation this power becomes “messier and multi-directional” (Neal and McLaughlin 2009, p699). The power dynamic between the researcher and interviewee needs to be reflected on critically, as does the impact of researching potentially emotional topics on the level of power that elites have over self-censorship. As identified by Lancaster (ibid p5), the notion that elites have fixed and high levels of power is questionable when they are subject to qualitative research.

When interviewing these elite participants, I was alert to the most emotional topics being revealed. During the interviews themselves, it was relatively easy to notice the times that topics became emotional and when participants began to feel therapeutic effects: indeed, some of the interview questions aimed to elicit responses to these emotional topics. On transcription and before analysis, when emotional topics had been discussed, I rechecked for factual accuracy the information given during emotional exchanges to give the participants the opportunity to reflect on information given during periods of greater emotional vulnerability. There are many ways of dealing with this but all of them brought with them threats to “accuracy” (ibid), so when participants changed their views following an interview, this was noted and its significance considered. On each occasion, the information was also triangulated with other research participants as far as confidentiality allowed.

Confidentiality was of utmost importance due to the significance of the political issues that could ensue should the wrong information be shared. Making this more complex was the fact that the research design necessitated the fact that answers from one tier of research participants informed questions in another. Additionally, much of the data collection took place at a time when political issues (such as school structure, hierarchy and power) were being actively discussed and adapted and decisions made, some of these decisions directly affecting the lives and job roles of the research participants. What was and what was not confidential, and therefore what could and could not be probed in interviews directly, was rarely clear. There were occasions when some questions could not be asked until a certain date or when some questions could only be addressed obliquely or thematically. On many occasions, interviewees would ask if I had been told about certain critical incidents or other events as a prelude to them telling their own story. On these occasions, I always reminded them about confidentiality. On most occasions, although the participants began their responses with little detail, following my encouraging body language, they went on to develop their stories fully.

## 3.17 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the research design and methodology. It has outlined researcher positionality and addressed the research question and the general approach, methods, sampling and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents the findings that emerged using this methodology.

**Chapter 4: Findings**

**4.1 Introduction**

*This chapter presents the findings. Data from interviews are in two main forms. The first is direct excerpt from interviews, sometimes with quotations. These have been chosen to illustrate particular points and to address the research question. The second is a set of fictional narrative ‘critical incidents’. The critical incidents are presented as narratives woven together from multiple tellings by different interviewees (see chapter 3, 3.12, for more information). These incidents were seen as critical by interviewees: they were regarded as the turning points and catalysts for major upheaval in the collaboration. Critical incidents are presented in boxes.*

The timeframe over which these findings are based is 1982 to 2016. This is because some of the interviewees felt that the first critical incident in the collaboration occurred in 1982. This chapter follows a broadly chronological structure from 1982 through to 2016. The following discussion chapter discusses the data through the lens of the themes from the LEGO® Serious Play® (SP) sessions. The chapter begins with a simple reminder of the themes which were a result of the analysis following the SP sessions. Following this is a list of the main actors and organisations involved in the collaboration. Through the use of excerpts from interviews, extracts from pertinent documents and newspaper articles and narrative critical incidents, the findings show interviewees’ perceptions of the relationships between the schools in Corton.

The critical incident from 1982 is the starting point. I then outline the school system as it stood in 1997 and the two ‘pyramids’ of schools. This is important background against which to set the following decade’s events. The chapter then covers plans to merge Miller Hall and Corton High Schools in 1997 and the relationship between the schools from 1998 to 2012. In the second critical incident, the governors at Miller Hall decide that they would like to establish a formal collaboration between the two schools as opposed to competing with Corton High. What follows are interviewees’ perceptions of the way the collaboration developed under this formal collaborative arrangement, a ‘hard federation’. Three further critical incidents show how disastrous they viewed this collaboration to be and what interviewees termed ‘the ruins’ – the time when many of the interviewees resigned or were made redundant. The chapter ends with interviewees’ perceptions from 2016 onwards – including the viewpoints of new staff who led the federation following the resignations and redundancies.

**4.2 A reminder of the key themes identified through the participatory task**

|  |
| --- |
| Resistance, sabotage, hostility to changeProfessional capacity, emotional reactionsClarity of vision, roles, ego and statusImpact of the macro on the micro Victims (“blood on the carpet”)Legacy issuesMoot points *–* the elephant in the room, relative institutional power |

Figure 4.2: The key clustered themes from the LEGO® Serious Play® sessions (see chapter 3 for full details):

Note: as stated above, this chapter is organised chronologically, so these themes are sometimes addressed indirectly. However, all of these themes are evident in this chapter.

**4.3 The interviewees and organisations**

During this chapter, acronyms and pseudonyms are used for various interviewees and organisations to maintain confidentiality. A pen portrait of each of these is given below.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Initial** | **Name** | **School** | **Pen portrait** |
|  |  | The federation | The federation was made up of four schools: two high schools and two primary schools. River Primary was a part of the ‘soft’ federation but did not join the hard federation. As such, it was not subject to the leadership of a single governing body.  |
|  |  | Miller Hall | Miller Hall was originally built in the 19th century and was the country seat of the Miller family, owners of large mills in England. Made of the local limestone and sporting stained glass and leaded windows, it occupied a large site with original Victorian gardens, oak-panelled classrooms and marble fireplaces. It was a comprehensive, co-educational school, serving an area of below average deprivation. It became a school in 1908. |
|  |  | Corton High | Corton High School was a comprehensive, co-educational school. In the 1940s, an estate of social housing was built close to the school. The school took pupils from this area. This area had a slightly higher than average deprivation indicator. The school also served a number of outlying farming communities. |
|  |  | Greenfield Primary | Greenfield Primary was a school of around 400 pupils located in the same catchment as Corton High School. As such, it served an area of slightly higher than national average deprivation and outlying farming communities.  |
|  |  | The federation executive team | This was made up of the executive headteacher, the executive business manager and director of post 16 education. All three of these employees’ contracts remained with Miller Hall for some or all of the years 2012*–*2016.  |
| AB |  | Alan Birch | A member of the executive team, Alan was the executive head of the three schools. He became an executive principal when the local authority asked him to help lead a school in a neighbouring town which Ofsted had judged inadequate. He took up this role when the position of executive principal was new and ill-defined. Alan was a National Leader of Education. Before leading more than one school, he was the headteacher of Miller Hall, one of the schools over which he became executive principal. He had an office in the Miller Hall building. He worked at Miller Hall and latterly across the schools in Corton for over three decades. |
| KL |  | Kev Lakin | A member of the executive team, Kev was the director of post 16 study across the two high schools, Miller Hall and Corton High. This role was at deputy headteacher level. He was previously assistant headteacher at Miller Hall, where he worked from 2002.  |
| BB |  | Betty Brown | Leader of the ‘Save our Schools’ campaign in the 1990s. A member of the community.  |
| CD |  | Colin Dakin | Colin was the headteacher of Miller Hall. When Alan became an executive headteacher, Colin became the headteacher, but ‘non-substantive’. This means that, in law, Alan Birch was still the headteacher of Miller Hall. Colin worked at Miller Hall High School for over two decades. |
| EF |  | Eric Fox | Eric was the headteacher (substantive) of Corton High School. He had been in this post since 2007, being the deputy headteacher previously. He worked at the school for over a decade.  |
| GH |  | Gail Harrow | Gail was ex-headteacher of Corton High and in post at the same time as the ex-headteacher of Miller Hall from the 1970s to the late 1990s. His name is Henry. |
| QR |  | Queenie Roberts | Queenie was the chair of the single governing body over Miller Hall, Corton High and Greenfield Primary. She was previously the chair of governors for Miller Hall from 1998. She was asked to be the chair of the governing body because, when the single governing body was formed, the chair of Corton High was too ill and the chair at Greenfield Primary not experienced enough to take on the role.  |
| ST |  | Steve Timms | Appointed in 2015 as the CEO of the schools in the federation upon the departure of QR and AB. Successfully led the schools to become academies in a MAT.  |

Table 4.1: Key Interviewees and locations: pen portraits

**4.4 Historical context**

Some of the interviewees had been involved in the Corton education system for some years; others for decades. They all told a story about a very early interaction between the headteacher of Miller Hall from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, and the headteacher of Corton High. This is the first critical incident mentioned by interviewees.

|  |
| --- |
| **Critical incident 1: “Ancient History”****1982**Several interviewees told the story below. They say that it was at this point in 1982 that relationships between the two schools soured *–* a situation that, according to them, caused many of the barriers to collaboration which remained in 2016.*In this critical incident, Henry, headteacher of Miller Hall, takes a part of Corton High School’s catchment and therefore some of its pupils. This happens in a meeting with Janet, headteacher of Corton High. Nancy is Henry’s personal assistant.* Rather chuffed with himself, Henry sat at the large oak table just a little nervous. London seemed a distant memory, its crumbling schools, noisy playgrounds and dirty air. The school in which he sat was peaceful, the leafy lawns stretched away like carefully brushed billiard tables. The office in which he sat was quiet and smelt of beeswax polish, dusty old furniture and worn leather: much like a good whisky, he ruminated. Nancy’s steps, each distinct footfall echoing round the walls outside his office, approached. There was a pause as she composed herself and knocked tersely. “She’s here, headteacher.” His heart beat a little faster. “Do show her in Nancy, and a little tea please. No biscuits thank you.” Almost imperceptibly, the edges of Nancy’s small mouth upturned, and as though checking herself, she said, monotonously: “Yes headteacher.”Altogether different footsteps approached. Determined perhaps? Angry? One of his favourite games was guessing the owners of the feet and musing on their mood, deciding how he was going to respond to them. No knock, the door opened and Janet, headteacher of the school across town, entered the room. A curt nod, just perfunctory enough not to be rude, but definitely on the side of loathing. “Do take a seat Janet. Thanks for coming over. Did you consider the proposal?”A pause before Janet replied: “Yes Henry, and I have a few issues with it.” Henry went on: “I know things are busy over the other side of town, and I hear that you’re struggling to fit all the pupils in. I hear that you need at least four more teachers if you’re to deliver the whole curriculum next year. This sort of arrangement will alleviate the whole issue, and of course, I have space for another hundred or so pupils. Everyone wins.”Janet thought. She met his steely eyes directly. “Giving Miller Hall all the pupils from the Burnham catchment would solve the issue for the next few years. Miller Hall would be full and Corton High would be full, not over capacity. I wouldn’t need the extra teachers, which I can’t really afford anyway, and we’d be less likely to lose the Burnham catchment to Hillside High.” Another pause, longer this time. “It would change the nature of the schools, Henry. Burnham is a growing catchment. Last year, another forty houses were built there. And we’re not talking terraces; these are houses for the very wealthy. These are the kids of the local elite, and you’re suggesting we put all these children all in one place. I came into this thinking it was a comprehensive system. I’m concerned it changes the nature of the schools.”Henry’s hands sweated under the table. His economist’s brain whirred through the risk of rural depopulation, falling birth rates, and the prize that the Burnham catchment represented. “Janet, let’s do it for a year and see what happens. Neither of us can afford the pupils going out of town for their education. And we don’t want to see them going into the private sector, do we?” Janet nodded slowly, closing her eyes. It *was* the only solution, though one she’d rather not accept.“For a year Henry.” The tea cups chattered childishly as Nancy came in. “Oh, Nancy, thanks, but Janet and I are done, I think? Janet? Do pop the tray down there.” He rose, offering Janet his hand. “Thanks Jan. Glad we could agree on it. I will let the governors and the local authority know.” “Thanks Henry. It gets us through the next year.” She gave a tight smile and left the office. “Well Nancy,” said Henry. “We have Burnham. And she’s not getting it back. Get the LA on the phone now please. And book the chair of governors in for 4pm.” |

**4.5 1997: empty pupil places**

In 1997, the town of Corton was unusual in having two separate high schools to cater for a total school population of around 1,100 pupils. In most towns there would be one high school for this number of pupils. This excess of capacity and the existence of two high schools where one would be more fiscally sound plays an important role in what follows.

**4.6 1997: Two pyramids**

In Corton, a town of just over 20,000 inhabitants, there were two ‘pyramids’ of schools, the West and East Pyramids. The West Pyramid served a mixed catchment that included a large outlying village. Although it had some pockets of deprivation, it could be described as having an above average socio-demographic profile: free school meals and special needs were below average, and stability[[3]](#footnote-3) above average. The East Pyramid served a mixed catchment that had more substantial pockets of deprivation, higher free-school-meal entitlement, and a higher level of special educational needs. It served a sizeable estate of social housing and many outlying farms and small villages. The two pyramids were separated by an imaginary line in the centre of the town. For many years, the two pyramids were characterised by mistrust between each other, difficult relationships between the student populations, including fighting, and little or no cross-pyramid communication between schools. The 1988 Education Act further exacerbated the issues, because parental choice (see ‘privatisation’ in chapter 5, 2.5) led a flow of students from aspirational families from the East to West Pyramids, causing financial difficulties for schools with shrinking rolls in the East Pyramid.

**4.7 1997: The plan to merge**

In August 1997, it was announced that governors from both high schools in the town had met to talk about a possible merger of the two schools. The conversation about the future of the two high schools was very much played out in the press. In March 1997, the local newspaper (not cited for anonymity reasons) proposed three options to the community: merging the two schools, keeping the two schools separate or keeping the two schools separate but running a joint sixth form of nearly 400 students. In a statement to the press, the headteacher of Corton High said: “We have the chance to involve the community in creating the most vibrant and high-quality schooling available in the country.” The head of Miller Hall said: “Forward planning is essential to ensure that the present high standing of Corton education is maintained, especially post-16.” The head of the then local education authority added that the aim of the proposals was to: “…continue and develop the strong, high-quality educational experience which Corton has had in the past decade.”

By September 1997, the newspapers reported that if the schools were to merge, Corton High would be the school to close. According to one interviewee who worked at one of the schools at the time, there had been a ‘behind the scenes’ agreement that the head of Corton High would become a deputy of the larger, merged school at Miller Hall, and that on the retirement of the head of Miller Hall (which was imminent), he would become headteacher. The sale of the Corton High site was reported in the local press to be worth £3 million, which would be used to create better and bigger facilities on the Miller Hall site. The reason for the proposed merger was also elaborated on: “The merger plans were unveiled earlier this year after it was revealed high school pupil numbers in the town are expected to fall in the early years of the next century because of a drop in the birth rate. Education officials say they want to act now to ensure they are well prepared for the decline in the number of youngsters entering the high schools.” (Newspaper article from September 1997.)

By early November 1997, the ‘Save Our Schools Action Group’ (SOSAG) had been formed. This body included no representation of parents or staff from the Miller Hall catchment; only parents and governors from the Corton High catchment. SOSAG held community meetings where attendees numbered over 100. “Campaigners opposed to the merger plan claim it would create highway dangers and leave many youngsters facing a walk of more than two miles through the busy town centre to reach the new school.”

By the end of 1997, the governing bodies of the schools had withdrawn support for the merger and announced that they would fight the local authority if it tried to force any change. Although governors of both schools supported the merger, the LA’s lack of ability to form a coherent plan, and an unexpectedly negative response from the community of Corton High, led to the withdrawal of governor support for the merger. The then chair of governors at Miller Hall said to the press: “…there were major concerns that insufficient funding would be available for re-organisation plans to work.” The SOSAG responded: “We are very relieved that the governors at Miller Hall have voted for the status quo option.” Following a 3,000-signature petition to the LA, the plans were scrapped. Following the scrapping of the plans, the head of Corton High resigned and took up a post in another school.

**1998–2009: New leaders and new opportunities; no change**

By the 1990s, the relationship between Corton High and Miller Hall had been odd for many years. In a small market town with around 280 children in each school year group, two high schools with a combined year group capacity of 370 operated. Situated only two miles apart, in the same LA, the relationship between the two schools was described as “non-existent” (AB, executive head). One might argue that this is unusual. Given the small and diminishing number of pupils, the financial pressures alone were good enough reason to collaborate, if not the moral and educational drivers. AB, the executive head of the schools commented:

“…after years of bad feeling between the schools, much of it from Henry’s side, [1970s to 2001] the links between the schools just didn’t exist. We can’t be surprised at that, the schools were in competition with each other for the same kids and the flow from the east side to the west, the aspirational parents wanting their kids in Miller Hall created a siege mentality at Corton High. They just weren’t willing to talk to us.” (AB, executive head, interview 2)

The chair of governors talked of very deliberate attempts to break with the past and to improve relationships. She also commented that the attempts had not been successful:

“I worked very hard to delete the suspicions. We could have forced through whatever changes we wanted to at that point, and unlike in the past we would have succeeded. But we wanted to do it well, fairly, supportively, take everyone with us…that was the mistake.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 2)

Even through the leaving of headteachers and arrival of new ones, the poor or non-relationship continued.

“…over the intervening 16 years the damage that was done to the foundations of the relationship meant that even as a brand-new head [arriving in 1998], I couldn’t do what I should be doing, like building relationships with other local schools. The bad relationship continues through changes in heads [in 2001] at Miller Hall too. We did collaborate on… things like joint post 16 courses in RE and Philosophy. But cooperation on this was withdrawn…very subtly…over the joint timetabling…it wasn’t that Miller Hall were saying that they wouldn’t cooperate…we would be told that things would operate jointly, and then very late in the process they just said that it couldn’t be timetabled…it became very obvious that this wasn’t incompetent timetabling, but…deliberate.” (GH, ex-head of Corton High)

The two schools in the town were insular and inward-facing. However, Corton High had a very strong track record in collaboration, which suggests that the issues with the relationship were not simply inward-facing leadership teams.

Corton High in 1998 began a very close relationship with Corton College, a local FE college in the town:

“That was where the difference was [between the relationship with Miller Hall and Corton College]…it took a while but we created a joint timetable, met in the middle and made it work…and that was totally different from the experience with Miller Hall…[in the absence of any collaboration with Miller Hall] I maintained very close links with the heads of all the other surrounding schools [through regular local heads’ meetings].” (GH, ex-head of Corton High)

During the period 1998**–**2006, Miller Hall increased its student numbers in two main ways: first, through taking more students from Corton High’s catchment; and second, in gaining many of the post 16 population of a nearby village. Around 240 students were added to its roll, which increased its size by around 30%. During this period, the relationship between Corton High and Miller Hall remained the same: “almost non-existent”. (AB, executive head). From 2006**–**2009, the relationship further regressed, at a time in the UK when the basis of 14**–**19 curriculum reform was collaboration to make sure that all students had access to a range of courses in all areas of the UK.

“The big focus at that stage was the 14**–**19 curriculum[[4]](#footnote-4), and Miller Hall were trying very hard not to be involved, they were dragging their feet and not wanting to collaborate, that was all about…we’re big, we brought in students from outside the town, we’re rich…we will do everything ourselves, no truck with the FE college or Corton High, we *will* do the 14**–**19 curriculum, but we will do it all ourselves, we will keep the students to ourselves, we won’t collaborate…we will send the ‘awkward squad’ [poorly behaved pupils] to other places…but only if it’s totally funded by someone else…and that’s a very good way of getting the naughty boys off the site, we will have that, we won’t put anything in…Miller, under AB (executive head) was very much ‘we don’t need the rest of you’ at the stage when there’s so much good collaboration went on [in other schools due to the 14**–**19 reforms] and it was about Miller Hall becoming more separate (bangs four times on the table).” (GH, ex-head of Corton High)

When focusing on school leaders at a lower seniority than headteachers, however, there are some very strong examples of collaboration throughout this period. An annual joint careers evening was put on each year for all the secondary pupils in the town. It rotated its location from one school to the other annually.

“…I think the strength of it was that it was long established, and that it was operated by people who were the key players, were people who had been doing it for donkey’s years and it wasn’t of interest to top brass… it worked because it was being organised at a different level…and it wasn’t interfered with.” (GH, ex-head of Corton High)

The head of Corton High 1998**–**2009 found it: “…hard to think of anything else significant in terms of collaboration…my joke to the three consecutive heads of Miller Hall [the three heads from the 1990s through to 2014] when I saw them was to thank them for the Miller Hall newsletters…Miller Hall kids would drop them in my garden on the way home from school…it was a way of making a point.” (GH, ex-head of Corton High)

**4.8 Critical incident 2: Miller Hall reaches out**

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| **2011***In this second critical incident, the governors of Miller Hall make the decision not to try to compete with Corton High and take it over but to approach them to collaborate as equal partners. This, according to interviewees from both Miller Hall and Corton High, was a key mistake in strategic planning.* **Miller Hall governors’ meeting 2011**“OK. Next agenda item is Alan. This is in as a confidential item. Alan?”“Thanks Jane.” Alan cleared his throat and began. “We all know there’s a long history of two schools in this town, when we only have the pupil numbers for one. We’ve had conversations before about trying to merge, work closely together, whatever. As we all well know, none of this has ever come to anything. I know a lot of you have been concerned by the almost absolute absence of any collaboration. Corton High is beginning to struggle. As pupil numbers go down, they’re becoming unviable. And one of my concerns is that if they go under, let’s say a bad inspection or they can’t get a head, they’re likely to get snapped up by an academy chain. We don’t want a new player in town **–** not least a new sponsor with an unlimited war chest.” “Queenie and I have had an initial meeting and we have some thoughts as to what we might do about all of this. We have a few options. It presents us with an opportunity. We could, quite easily, simply take them over. Wait until they get a bad inspection or until they have no cash left and merge. With my profile in the local authority now, we could do that.” James, a sleepy governor across the table, seemed to come to life: “Alan. Why do we need to do anything? We have a really strong reputation; many pupils would rather come here than there…we can simply let them wither. No effort on our part?” Alan replied, patiently: “Thanks James, and that’s true, we could. My view is that the children in Corton deserve better of us. Standards at Corton High are poor and getting poorer. Just because you’re a kid from a poor background doesn’t mean that you can’t do well. And every year, they get poor results. To simply let it get worse risks a really turbulent time for the kids up there. At this point I don’t want to share what I think but just give you the facts and we should discuss it.” James asked: “So the opposite then, make it fast. Take them on. Actively recruit their kids from the feeder schools. Shut them.”Again, Alan, who had rehearsed all of these arguments before, replied patiently: “James, there are reasons that we shouldn’t do that, too. We will come to that. Queenie, do you want to share your thoughts?”Queenie, the chair of governors began: “James, we’ve thought through both those courses of action. Part of me wants to simply let them flounder, and another part of me thinks we should make it quick. Take every action we can to go up against them. You know what? We’re not that kind of school. We could very well shut them in about a year. My view is that we should move forward in as positive a way as we can. We should approach them and try to form a real collaboration. Help them to improve. Keep as many staff as we can. This could bring us so many more opportunities. They have assets that could be pooled with ours, keep those assets for the kids in the town. If they shut, you can be damn sure someone’ll build houses on the land! My view is we stick to who we are morally and try to form a federation that benefits everyone and doesn’t end in lots of job losses or kids without a school to go to.” Alan took over: “So,” he began, “Queenie and I propose that we seek to meet with Corton High’s governing body to discuss a federation. Working together, as opposed to being competitive, *has* to make us stronger in the end.” All at the meeting agreed.  |

**4.9 2012: The federation**

During 2011 and early in 2012, discussions took place across all the Corton schools’ governing bodies about how to tackle the challenges in education facing all schools. In a letter sent to all parents[[5]](#footnote-5) across the town, signed by the headteachers and governing bodies, there was mention of the present government introducing: “change into the educational system at a breathtaking pace, set in the context of reduced funding and rising expectations of schools…” and the schools needing to “…increasingly …collaborate even further with each other if they are to continue to raise standards and improve facilities. This will be a huge challenge at a time of reduced income and increasingly rigorous inspection by Ofsted.” (Letter to parents, February 2012). The proposal was that a “hard federation” (HF) be established. An HF is an arrangement where more than one school has a single governing body. This means that the schools within the HF formally share a single employer, and a single vision as an organisation. In late March 2012, public meetings were held in each of the four schools. The total number of attendees was four. Alan Birch, the executive head commented:

“…so, in 1997 we got thousands of signatures and huge angst at any proposal that changed the schools in any way. This time it was managed differently, we pushed the collaboration angle and the schools themselves were seen as driving the changes, not the local authority. It seems that either no one noticed what we were doing, or no one cared as much as they did in 1997.”

In order to evaluate the actions of leaders, it is important to evaluate the success of the whole of the federation project. The project’s stated aims at its inception were educational: “As you would expect the key benefits will be educational.” (federation consultation letter March 2012). They allowed the development of the following features:

* To “enable a child’s journey through the system to be planned more effectively. We all have to take responsibility for all of the children in the schools. Resource, support, care and guidance must be focused on the needs of the child, not the school.”
* To be a “mechanism for developing this change of focus away from needless competition between schools. It will also be a springboard for further raising the aspirations of students throughout the town.”
* To facilitate better transition: “…transition between stages and schools will be further improved. Our schools will be able to develop a range of clear and consistent policies and procedures for a range of educational activities such as assessment, learning and teaching, quality control and classroom management while improved cooperation will allow for greater sharing of good practice, teaching expertise, management and the reaching of joint solutions to individual problems; it will build capacity.”
* To enable more joint working on curriculum: “Curriculum planning will become much more flexible across the four schools and extra-curricular activities can be enhanced as facilities and costs can be shared – a trip that is not viable for one school becomes viable if two or more are involved.”
* To attract and keep the best staff: “Importantly there will be an improved capacity to recruit and retain the best staff.”
* To organise more coherently: “We will also establish improved procedures that will ensure that there is ‘joined–up thinking’ around holidays, training sessions, whole school events and transition. At a time of economic uncertainty, we will be able to have a consistent approach to the delivery of care, information and guidance and support.”
* To draw the schools together: “In summary, we aim to create a single learning community that will improve educational outcomes and strengthen the consistency of education for the whole community building upon the exemplary work being completed in our Schools.”

In addition to the overtly stated aims, the rationale section of the letter which consulted parents on the federation of the Corton schools said:

“…This would mean that these three schools would have one new Governing Body that would be able to plan across the three schools; each school would also retain its own School Management Committee and each school would remain on its own site functioning in exactly the same way as it does today. Each of the three schools would keep its unique Department for Education number, retain its own budget and staff would remain contracted to their current school… For the first time ever, decisions about all aspects of secondary school planning will be made across the town in the best interests of all the students in Corton and the [surrounding area].” (Federation consultation letter March 2012)

The other more oblique aims were therefore to:

* maintain each of the three sites,
* maintain the sites’ independence, and
* make decisions in the best interests of all the students, not students in individual schools.

Many of these stated aims could be argued to have been left unmet in 2015, and even by the end of the academic year in 2016.

With regard to the non-meeting of stated aims, the most frequently cited and emotionally discussed issue in the development of the federation was the speed of change and acts of sabotage. According to most interviewees, this sabotage was deliberate and ongoing, undermining the federation’s ability to develop. These examples provide a flavour of the general feeling of most interviewees:

“EF’s (head of Corton High) stalling tactics were clever. Very clever. He would agree to do something, then go back to school and have his mind changed [by the assistant head in that school].” (AB, executive head, Interview 3)

“I didn’t perceive EF to be very strong, but he managed to put up a lot of resistance.” (QR, chair of governors, Interview 2)

The disruption of the flow of information to staff was also a key strategy which, it is claimed, was used to sabotage the development of the federation. However, the resistance and resulting sabotage would sometimes not be discovered until it was too late and had done damage to relationships:

“This lack of carrying out what was agreed was never overt and wouldn’t come to light for a while. By the time anyone discovered it, it was always too late, or there was deniability. On the odd occasion that it was obvious that someone hadn’t toed the line, he just admitted to it and played the ‘it’s my school and I’m in charge’ card.” (AB, executive head, interview 1).

The chair of governors recounts a time towards the end of her tenure when information was released early, a form of resistance, causing one school’s staff to know key information before the rest of the federation:

“CD was rightly inflamed that the staff at Corton High had been told before he had. He was outside the school, and I went to see him. He told me what had gone on and I was so furious I went straight up there [to Corton High to see EF] and had it out with him there and then. I had a choice [as to who to protect], and I’m afraid KL lost: protect KL and say nothing, or let EF know that KL had disclosed the email, not mention that CD had spoken to me and protect CD. I chose the latter, and that caused the ructions and total breakdown in the relationship KL had with EF.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 1)

“…I wish I had been more relentless with checking that staff had been kept fully informed. I agreed with the heads that they were responsible for keeping their line fully informed and I trusted them to pass messages on so that everyone knew what was going on. I never thought to check that they did this. Messages not getting through was a part of the sabotage…we [the governing body and headteachers] were really nervous that the big restructure [of all staff with responsibilities beyond the classroom] was coming.” (AB, executive head, interview 2)

While this large restructure was held off (and in 2016 had still not happened), once its possibility had been discussed at governors, EF (head of Corton High) told the staff at Corton High about the restructure. Following a meeting with the heads of art from each school, the head of art at Miller hall recounts:

“…when I arrived [the head of art at Corton High] said that she had been told that the meeting was to decide who was going to be the lead school in managing both departments as there was only going to be one subject leader. She then said that it was going to be at Miller Hall because they had more students there. She said she had been told this by EF (head of Corton High) as they meet every 2/3 weeks.” (EF email extract)

The outcome of this meeting was that a rumour spread amongst many of the staff at Miller Hall that there was a covert plan to make redundant half of the subject leaders. The head of art at Corton High, when questioned about where the notion of a single subject leader across both sites had come from, said:

“…I think from what I can gather you went away with the wrong idea **–** sorry for any confusion **–** of how things may or may not pan out based on just general planning ideas that we've been discussing here at Corton High as a school. There have been lots of ideas and theories flying around about how departments could work but nothing concrete and perhaps because Miller Hall haven't had those conversations it was a bit of a shock, understandably.” (Excerpt from email between heads of art at Miller Hall and Corton High with EF, head of Corton High)

The head of Corton High responded to the suggestion that he had discussed single subject leaders with his staff:

“…yes, told staff that there will eventually be one SL cross site eventually **–** we have to go in this direction if we are going to save any money…” (EF, head of Corton High, meeting notes)

However, the motivations for this apparent sabotage are seen in different lights according to the seniority and role of interviewee. Those in the top school leadership positions (executive head, headteachers) reflect on acts of sabotage as understandable, acts that they would replicate if they were in the same situation. They saw the acts as a show of strength, as these extracts demonstrate.

“I would have done the same. It’s the job of a substantive[[6]](#footnote-6) head to protect the individual school. It was my job to develop and protect the system. One of the issues was that collaboration is best done at a distance. If Corton got better, Miller Hall would lose students to them. It provided an underlying competition which with more than one substantive leader was hard to break.” (AB, executive head, interview1)

Others (less senior staff, governors) saw these tactics as simply sabotage.

One of the most powerful acts of sabotage was in the form of Corton High’s long-term stock-piling of cash reserves. Over many years, Corton High had stockpiled a sizable cash reserve. This, according to the chair of governors, enabled them to resist any change, as the financial drivers did not exist to push collaboration.

“…Corton High’s reserves were there to avoid redundancies, maintain small class sizes for three years…it was that which *enabled* the resistance against the changes that we needed at Corton and the integration of the sixth form. Any notion of spending those reserves elsewhere weren’t even discussed in [full governing body] meetings…too sensitive.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 2)

This issue of whether headteachers in the federation were ‘substantive’ or not appears to be of significance in the relative power of actors and this is one more level of complexity to the struggle to make the hierarchical structure work. Between 2012 and 2015, the headteacher of Miller Hall was the only one of the headteachers not to be substantive. This was because AB, the executive headteacher, had retained the substantive headship of Miller Hall. The headteacher of Miller Hall was the one headteacher who had no legal grounds to refuse what the executive headteacher asked for. The headteacher of Corton High reflects on this:

“…that was so hard for CD [headteacher, non-substantive, of Miller Hall] being the only ‘not-real’ head in the room. I had a really good relationship with him. I felt sorry for him, he is a good man and I worked really well with him. But the power over your own school…well he didn’t have it and that was obvious to him and everyone else. It wasn’t really mentioned but he did have, by definition, a different role than we had…” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1.)

The reasons cited by AB (executive headteacher) for remaining as substantive head of one school was that this was his “safety net…the only person that can’t be gotten rid of in a structure is the substantive headteacher.” (AB, executive head, interview 2). Within this comment is a sense of self-preservation – understandable to some extent in the turbulent times of the federation between 2012 and 2015. To have given up this role in law would have made himself more vulnerable. Low levels of trust between him, the governing body and the unwillingness of the headteachers of two of the schools in the federation, Corton High and Greenfield Primary led him to feel unable to give up this role of substantive headteacher. Perversely, this might have allowed other actors to see him as more independent of the schools, having all the schools’ best interests in mind and not being too close to Miller Hall and its concerns.

The issue of leadership power, structure and hierarchy is again seen in the oblique ways in which the executive headteacher needed to manage the headteacher of Corton High. Here, the executive headteacher recounts the decision to use a third-party, external consultant to set performance management targets:

“…we asked [an external consultant] to set the performance management targets for the heads. This was to bring in a sense of external scrutiny and independence to the process. I was, quite deliberately, uninvolved. Unfortunately, the governors who called her in cocked this up. They asked the external consultant to make sure that the heads were held to account for the driving forward of the federation [which they had been resistant to]…so the consultant set targets that related to the development of the federation. They were my performance management targets, so as I met my targets, they had, de facto, met theirs and there was nothing more to hold them to account with. Basically, I met their targets for them, and then found I couldn’t hold them to account for anything else.” (AB, executive headteacher, interview 3)

In addition to this external consultant, another way in which Alan (executive head) acted vicariously was through an LA consultant. This consultant was brought in to work with Corton High when its results in 2014 raised serious concerns about its vulnerability to an inadequate outcome on inspection, an inspection that governors and leaders thought was due to happen. This vicarious use of power seems to have had the desired impact, and Corton High’s headline measures improved by over 11% over the year. In all elements of the collaboration, there were issues of Corton not being “on the page” (AB, executive head), even on the seemingly benign issues:

“EF refused a common email system for no good reason, and things like a common email system were the sorts of things that had the potential to move things forward in people’s minds. Greenfield took on the common email system and of course, then, just under two thirds of the staff in the federation have common emails, and every time one comes from Corton High, it’s yet another signifier of difference and separation. If a few hundred emails come from Corton High each day, it adds up to a few hundred daily reminders of difference.” (AB, executive head, interview 2)

Aside from emails, there were a number of seemingly important artefacts that interviewees mentioned as taking on curious significance as the collaboration developed. These are analysed in the discussion chapter (5.15):

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| **Artifact** | **Description** |
| Email addresses | While Miller Hall employees moved to an ‘@cortonfederation’ email address, EF refused to do this at Corton High, keeping a ‘@cortonhigh’ suffix. |
| Coffee | At all meetings in the Corton High building, EF provided freshly brewed coffee. He served this personally.  |
| The council estate, pupil deprivation | While Miller Hall was situated in an area of mixed housing stock, Corton High was situated very close to an estate of council housing. Miller Hall’s main pupil deprivation indicator was half that of Corton High. |
| The motorbike | The executive principal drove a motorbike and, very occasionally, arrived at meetings on this.  |
| Signage, logos, letterheads | Corton High rejected every version (22 versions) of a new logo designed to bring together the branding of the two post-16 bodies.  |
| The farms and hills | Corton High serves a population including dozens of small farming villages. Its physical location on the outskirts of Corton, near these villages, held importance. |
| The sports hall | Corton High had a large sports hall, and far superior sports facilities to Miller Hall |

Table 4.2: Artefacts in the network

Although the main thrust of years one and two of the federation was to align business functions, this was because of its relative ease, not through necessity. Even though the business functions were seen as uncontroversial, there were issues with their implementation:

“…for example, I (AB, executive head) agreed on directly employing cleaners across the federation. EF (head of Corton High) didn’t want this so resolved a vote [called for a vote in the governors’ meeting] and resisted. The ex-Corton High governors said we should let the other schools do it first as a pilot. It had already been trialled in [two other local schools] and there wasn’t anything to trial! It was ridiculous, like, once EF said something, a switch flicked on [the ex-Corton High governors’] backs and they started to resist. Anything that impacted on EF or Corton High. And that was simply reducing the costs of the cleaners!” (AB, interview 2)

There were particular points, described as “crunch points” (AB, executive head, interview 2) at which resistance became most overt. One of these was the alignment of specifications on post-16 courses.[[7]](#footnote-7) Post-16 student numbers were of concern at Corton High, and to a lesser extent at Miller Hall:

“You simply can’t continue to run classes of four or five, or sometimes one! The whole idea of coming together was to solve issues like this…” (AB, executive head, interview 4)

The reserves built up at Corton High provided the means of sabotage in this context. The school was able to run unsuitably small sixth-form classes, removing the driver to collaborate. Indeed, when an analysis of the courses was undertaken, it was established that 21 out of 26 courses were with different providers:

“Was that an accident [that most of the courses were different across the two school sites]? So almost all of the courses are different specs across the two high schools and the number of people you’re going to piss off mean that whoever does that job is going to be nobody’s friend. You will piss off exactly half of the staff because you’re going to need half of them to change specs so that you can amalgamate classes, and it’s no secret that when you amalgamate classes you’re going to makes someone redundant.” (CD, head of Miller Hall, interview 2)

Added to this was the fact that in the academic year 2015/16, many of the courses would change in a government reform, so new specifications would be chosen anyway. While the sixth form was seen as the part of the two high schools that would lead the collaboration, it was “way more complex than it look[ed]” (AB, executive head, interview 2). It would take very bold decisions to make changes. This lack of boldness is discussed later in this chapter. In 2013/14, the first new appointment was made to this federation team. The shrinking size of Corton High’s sixth form, along with funding reforms that negatively affected both high schools’ income, meant that the two sixth forms needed to be merged to make them sustainable.[[8]](#footnote-8) As a result, a new post was created – that of director of the federation sixth form.

Applications for this post were open to all employees of federation schools and an employee of Miller Hall was appointed to the post. This further exacerbated the bad feeling between the schools, as all senior staff in the federation team were from Miller Hall. The vehicle of post-16 provision to align the two high schools was described as a flawed one:

“…it was never written down but always talked about that the post-16 provision was unsustainable at Corton High because of the small numbers of students. Corton High had been able to sustain this sixth form by being creative with timetabling – amalgamating classes, timetabling classes of Years 12 and 13 together, giving very small classes less hours of tuition, doing after hours classes…that seemed to be about to end because of the massive changes to post-16 funding in 2013 and the huge changes to the courses coming in 2014-16. However, the levers for changes at Corton High never materialised because EF, the headteacher, had stockpiled about half a million in cash to see the school through three years without any staff cuts.” (AB, interview 1)

One interviewee saw different acts of sabotage as acts of desperation fuelled by fear.

“Eric was terrified and the more terrified he got, the more angry he got and the more angry he got, the more his senior staff would say ’we shouldn’t take any notice of this and Alan is after that ... [he said that Alan was] taking over the universe…somehow that they would be done out of their jobs…I don’t know even if they thought that but that somehow he was getting too big for his boots, Miller Hall would take all of the students, Miller Hall would take over Corton High and Corton High wouldn’t exist anymore …” (QR, chair of governors, interview 1)

One of the most frequently cited issues with the project was the speed of change, which met almost no one’s approval. QR, the chair of the federation governing body, saw the pace as very slow, and resistance as the key factor in the speed:

“Slow…very slow…and they were very slow because of the sabotage and resistance. There was so much resistance. In the headteachers’ meetings that I attended, and the senior governors’ [meetings], it would all appear on paper that we were going to go dramatically fast, but it didn’t, there was no…because AB (executive head) was head of Miller, there were questions about why he going to be the boss, even though we had appointed him as the boss…whereas I was going in saying ‘he IS the boss’ but he couldn’t tell anyone anything with clarity and authority.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 2)

At one point, a governor visited a member of the senior team to discuss this “off the record”:

“[A governor] visited, off the record, to ask me what AB (executive head) was doing. I told him what the barriers were, and he told me that he’d heard that from AB before many times, and that he [the governor] had worked in a federated sixth form years before and they had managed to make it work.” (KL, director of post-16.)

The executive head felt that there was a misunderstanding on the part of governors on what was actually possible:

“The governors didn’t understand that no one would give us money to do anything.” (AB, executive head, interview 2)

The headteacher of Corton High felt that a key barrier was the continued existence of the original senior leaders from the separate schools:

AB (executive head) would go to the governors and say we’ve done this and that and this…but the pace was slow because we didn’t actually know where we were going…and towards the end, you and I didn’t know either…they needed to replace AB (executive head) much earlier, that should have happened two years earlier…that decision was made too slowly.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 2)

The chair of governors also echoed EF’s sentiments about the provenance of staff having an impact on the pace of change. However, it was not simply the presence of Miller Hall staff at the centre:

“Because I was the chair and Alan, this business manager and the director of sixth were all from Miller Hall…and we were all better at our jobs than our equivalents in other schools, we were terrifying and therefore there was a fear of taking over…” (QR, chair of governors, interview 1)

There were, however, other views on the speed of change:

“It couldn’t have gone any faster at all. Nothing could have gone quicker in the circumstances: the failed MAT application, the budget deficit…the complexities of the sixth form…” (AB, executive head, interview 1)

“The issues are so complex that I can’t see this moving any faster for a while…every avenue we explore is a dead end – can’t sell land, can’t co-locate [both sixth forms]…this leaves an issue for me as the staffing gets reduced: high salary, little progress on my job. Risky time.” (KL, director of post-16)

“I wrote the full staffing structure and costings for every one of the options on the table…but the governors could never agree on one site or two sites. We debated it all, two sites and an all-through school[[9]](#footnote-9) on Corton High’s site, debated sixth form on one site or the other, the sixth form on the Greenfield site, get rid of one site, sell off the land…” (AB, executive head, interview 2)

“I did one of about 50 things on the to-do list, and in each of three years, the bulk of the strategic plan was delivered.” (AB, executive head, interview 2)

The actions of the LA were seen as a key barrier to the development of the federation but were only mentioned (in detail) by AB (executive head). No other interviewees mention this factor.

“The governors asked me to plan our next steps, so I had massive meetings with [the highest officers of the LA]. What I was discussing with them would have radically restructured and made sustainable the whole [education] system [in Corton]…[with regards to the selling of one of the sites to fund developments on another]. They said that absolutely no money could come to the federation if we sold a site. They also said that if we had to transfer students [transport students to other parts of the town], they would give us no assistance…it also took them two months to answer each little question…the bill for transport alone would have been £50,000 each year if we shut a site, and the LA wouldn’t pay… Eventually his [the LA officer’s] position was that he wanted two high schools in the town…we’d wasted 10 months then. If you don’t know how many sites you have you can’t plan the staffing structure.” (AB, executive head, interview 2)

The decision of the LA to want to have two high schools in the town was a barrier to setting up the hard federation: although the power of the LA to force such a structure was more limited than it had been in the past, the lack of LA support for transport and a lack of its political support meant that to have one school would be difficult, even though the governing body saw the importance of shutting one of the schools:

“AB (executive head) was of the opinion that the structure would only work with one ‘boss’ to give direction and clarity. The town does not have sufficient students to warrant two High Schools and having three sites is a very valuable resource. However, this has implications… [a governor] gave a clear preference to operate as a single School…the number of sites to be determined. He recognised that long-term, there will be a financial impact of sustaining one School on three sites.” (Governing body meeting minutes 2013)

One factor in the stalling of relationship development was the fear of a takeover:

“At Corton High, there was always a suspicion that Miller Hall thought they were better than us…” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 2)

“…also, the fear of the ‘mega-takeover.’ There was so much being precious, people saying ‘we won’t change this, and we can’t change that’, mainly with no real reason, just a precious desire to be separate schools and not work together.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 2)

There was a sense of people’s professional and personal attitudes changing as the federation project progressed, further slowing the progress:

“AB (executive head) originally being head of Miller Hall was the key barrier, but not to AB: he was passionate about doing the right thing in the beginning, but towards the end…he got worn down by it.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 2)

Over time, the governing body’s resolve and enthusiasm waned as it met more and more resistance:

“The meetings we had originally, we were come on, we will man the barricade, it will all happen, and all be lovely! That changed as time went on.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 2)

And when decisive action was deemed to be required following declining outcomes at Corton High, the chair of governors felt that the resolve of the executive principal had waned:

“…as time went on and there was a point that we [senior governors] wanted AB (executive head) to go into Corton High and we’d got that document signed with the heads [each substantive headteacher and the governors signed to give AB an executive role over them], giving him the authority to go in, and at that point, he didn’t seem to want to do that, he didn’t want to go to tell EF (head of Corton High) in the way he’d talk before [about being decisive], he would say ‘…well I will go in and negotiate with EF and talk about the price of fish but I’m not going to be pushing it’ so the level of incompetence [displayed by EF at Corton High] was allowed to carry on.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 2)

Further lack of clarity in roles was caused by the new director of sixth form’s lack of a job description and other people’s assumptions about what was required of him. In fact, on the head of sixth form asking for a job description, this was refused by senior leaders:

“…clear from [AB] that the role is to align the post-16 in the short term and use this as a springboard to align the both schools totally. Not possible to express this in a JD [job description] due to political sensitivities. Using the P16 to show what can be done, then transfer to other year groups.” (KL, director of sixth form.)

This lack of clarity in roles and the power to execute them are cited as key issues in the pace of change by EF. EF had accepted the governing body’s designation of AB as executive head with authority over EF. However:

“Roles were a mess, I was a real head as was MN [head of Greenfield]. AB was an executive head but had no influence unless he went back to the governors, CD’s position was very difficult, he wasn’t properly head in his own school, so AB could tell him what to do, but couldn’t do that to us.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1)

While the chair of governors and executive headteacher took the existence of ‘senior governors’ as a matter of course, this title did not have a shared understanding amongst other governors or senior staff. The ‘senior governors’ were the chairs of each of the governing body’s committees. According to AB, the executive headteacher, he invented them in 2006. Since then, they had been a part of Miller Hall’s structure and were subsequently adopted by the new federation.

These senior governors were not the only unofficial or semi-official group of governors. According to the chair of the governors, QR:

“…there are the pre-meetings when governor X and governor Y go to Eric’s office before a governing body meeting to discuss tactics…” (QR, chair of governors, interview 1)

There were also, according to some participants, semi-formal or informal meetings between governors and some staff. For example:

“Out of the blue, governor X requests a meeting. I feel a little honored he wants to meet me, wonder what he wants…turns out he’s coming to ask me what the executive principal is doing, why everything is taking so long and what is my take on it…I toe the party line, tell him things are complex and the very fact that there is now a relationship between the schools where none existed before is much progress. I want to say that it’s all a mess but bite my tongue. It all feels very risky. I am discussing the professional conduct of my boss with someone who is, in effect, his boss. Uncomfortable.” (KL, head of sixth)

Regardless of whether these covert meetings happened or what impact they had, they were believed to be happening by the executive headteacher, chair of governors and head of Miller Hall. This belief led to changes in the ways in which these people prepared for and operated in the meetings. There was a heightened state of wariness and reactivity towards the governors who engaged in these extra, unofficial meetings.

In evaluating the reason for this lack of clarity, there are differences of opinion: while the governors felt that their view was clear, and AB was seen as being resistant to executing the power given to him by the governing body, EF felt that the governors were too “weak”:

“[The] governors weren’t ruthless enough. They should have told AB [executive head], MN [head of Greenfield] and myself to go [resign] three years ago. Then the whole of this could have moved on at a reasonable pace. It [slow pace of change] wasn’t an inevitability! People weren’t bold enough: the only bold decision would have been for AB to step back and resign but he wasn’t in a position to do that.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1)

The new federation governing body was made up of a selection of governors from each of the three predecessor schools. Suspicions of motive between ex-governors of these schools, now governors over all three, were pervasive:

“[The senior governors] worked very hard to do that [build trust]: there were two tiers of governors, senior – a lovely lady who died (forgets name). She was fantastic and drawing everyone in and when she left the governing body, the ex-Corton High governors very definitely felt like they were out for Corton High first and the rest second, although they could see a bigger picture, when it seemed to suit them.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 1)

“Governors all came with their own school agenda [not a federation one].” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 2)

This sense of suspicion was inevitable following the death of one of the Corton High governors, who had been a senior governor in the new governing body and the ex-chair of the Corton High governing body. Her death left most of the senior positions in the federation (the chair of governors, executive headteacher, the business manager and head of sixth form) to ex-Miller Hall personnel:

This senior staffing of the federation was not intentional, and even those who expressed their concerns about the feeling of a takeover knew that the original plan was different. However, despite the fact that they knew this, they felt that the arrangements were damaging:

“The intention was for QR to do a year then [the ex-head of Corton High governors] to do a year. [The ex-head of Corton High governors] died. She had a lot of capacity and although was linked to Corton High she had a whole-of Corton outlook. If you’re going to be chair of governors, you have to be clear about your motivation and direction and I don’t think we always were.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1)

“EF resisted having me in my NLE[[10]](#footnote-10) role, which was ridiculous – having an NLE here in the federation and not allowing me to support him. It was back to ‘AB is from Miller Hall and if he says anything, regardless of how sensible it is, we’re not doing it’…” (AB, executive head, interview 2)

“I didn’t trust a number of key governors. I didn’t trust QR [chair]. No one trusted [another governor] to be even-handed towards Corton High…you get resistance from that.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 2)

However, there was a deliberate attempt to build trust by some parties, and an attempt to make the relationships between the schools ‘equal’:

“I tried to build trust by asking AB (executive head) for advice whether I needed it or not, to stroke his ego. I’d also ask CD [non-substantive head or Miller Hall] for advice or offer help to him…but there wasn’t enough bending over backwards to accommodate because my [Corton High’s] financial capacity was tight, whereas Miller Hall was seemingly awash financially.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1)

“The governing body worked very hard to try to make everything inclusive. There was no talk of one school being better than another, there just seemed to be a huge amount of threat and when we tried to be one governing body, and we got better at it but there was still a lot of division in this, but there was a lot of resistance when we used Miller Hall’s policies (Corton High didn’t have any) for lots of things.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 2)

“People viewed the federation with some suspicion, so we didn’t push the title [in press releases and other public documentation]. No one knew how the governing body would react to certain proposals, so we decided that we would do all of the obvious and benign things, and significantly restructured the non-teaching staff. But almost all of the policies were Miller Hall’s. Corton basically didn’t have any policies and policies were our starting point.” (AB, executive head, interview 3)

“That used to really wind me up. We’d go to a meeting and Miller Hall’s name would be on the documentation, not Corton High’s…every time that happened it felt like a takeover.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1)

“We nibbled away [at the financial reserves] and disadvantaged Miller Hall to show willing and we couldn’t keep on doing this…you reached a point when Corton High had to give something…but they didn’t…” (AB, executive head, interview 2)

In fact, there were areas in which trust was built and progress in collaboration made, and these were when those not in the top tier of leadership were involved:

“It was usually the least experienced that helped us build trust. CD [head of Miller Hall] was the least experienced of all of us and was the best at building trust. Also, Kev coming over built trust. Kev came to work here, and we could see he wasn’t the enemy.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 2)

The transfer of staff from one site to another was limited to one person (KL, director of post-16), but this was cited as a key trust-building action between more junior staff rather than between leadership teams. The environment within which business was conducted became important in the development of trust:

“…it was when we didn’t have formal meetings, it was the impromptu meetings or the ones that were called by junior leaders and they were the best. They were open and honest. Normally, we all pussyfooted around not knowing what to say and when we did say things then we misunderstood one another…[However when] junior leaders were driving the meetings and they were un-minuted, they were open and honest, you’re not even aware of a building of trust taking place.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1)

One issue cited was the parallel expertise displayed when junior leaders – those with the same expertise or role in different schools – worked together. Of the teaching and learning committee, EF said:

“…Kev and IJ [then assistant head of Greenfield] brought their egos to the teaching and learning committee.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1)

Personality types, not roles, were suggested to be to blame:

“…but when [the assistant heads in charge of the timetable and curriculum] worked together, it worked well because they didn’t bring an ego into the room. Them working together was good.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1)

The reasons for low levels of trust were also the source of the finance used to pay key members of staff. EF, headteacher of Corton high, claimed that Corton High’s financial capacity was “tight” (even though the reserves had been built up) and so the full salary of the executive head, the federation business manager and the head of sixth form were all paid by Miller Hall:

“[KL] should have been paid in a different way because [KL was] being asked to work across both schools. We [both high schools] appointed [KL] and paid [KL] from one pot [Miller Hall’s], so there was always a suspicion of KL’s motives…To us, KL had an agenda, and was being paid by Miller…we should have paid half each so that I had half of the whip, not even pay by student numbers [a formula which takes into account the different sizes of the schools to pay bills]…KL became the whipping boy, we were saying ‘KL isn’t doing this or that’ but KL wasn’t doing it because we weren’t paying [him], and we never told [him] what it was we wanted [him] to do. There just shouldn’t be this confusion of roles.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1)

The sixth form, which was supposed to drive the federation’s development, was described as a “battleground” and although it was hoped that it would become the driver of the federation’s every closer relationship, it was often at risk of being a barrier:

“On the day of the appointment [of the head of sixth] we got that wrong. We didn’t know what we wanted. We shouldn’t have made a single appointment but made everyone at that level have cross-school responsibilities. Keeping them all busy would have given them less time to fight the appointee. It was positioning, micro politics and hierarchy.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 2)

The sixth form becoming a battleground and the reasons for this are cited by all interviewees:

“Job structures weren’t well defined, and people weren’t given the tools or access to do the job. They asked for this and we said no. It became a battleground.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1)

There was a legal anomaly in the status of the headteachers, with two of them being substantive (legally the headteacher of their school) and one non-substantive (called the headteacher but lacking in the ultimate legal powers of a headteacher and needing to refer most matters to the executive headteacher). So, although AB (executive head) was officially the line manager of all the headteachers, the only person who could “force” the headteachers of Corton High and Greenfield to do anything they did not want to do was the chair of governors. One key incident was a threat of legal action against the governing body, which coloured all subsequent dealings with EF, the headteacher of Corton High:

“EF (head of Corton High) told QR (chair of governors) that if there was anything we tried to force him to do he would ‘take it to law’, and he consulted lawyers.” (AB, executive head, interview 2)

Even when the governors delegated the ultimate authority to the executive headteacher, they undermined his decisions on occasion:

“When I did tell EF what to do, he’d go to [an ex-Corton High governor] who would tell me ‘no’. And EF would have briefing sessions with [the ex-Corton High] governors, where approaches to full governors’ meetings would be decided.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 2)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, one accusation levelled at the governing body and the leadership teams in general was a lack of boldness, driven by self-preservation. All of the senior staff – the executive head, three heads and the chair of governors – either resigned or were made redundant in the summer of 2015. Three of these interviewees during the LEGO® SP sessions mentioned the unusual phrase “blood on the carpet” and this theme was therefore raised in the second phase interviews. The impact on these people was profound as some described in the interviews:

“…the governors weren’t ruthless enough. They should have told AB (executive head), CD (headteacher of Miller Hall) and myself to go three years ago. And when [a governor] came to ask me, at a point when things got really fraught, what we should do…as I said it, I realised I was making myself redundant…It needed stripping out and starting again.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1)

“…so, at that point [when EF threatened legal action], I had to decide whether to go back to the governing body to ask for more delegated powers or whether to simply resign as I didn’t have enough power to actually do my job. The governors would have backed me on a majority, but it would have split the governing body, and if I did that, the whole project [the federation] was dead in the water…the muddiness of the substantive/non-substantive thing caused this issue.” (AB, executive headteacher interview 2)

“So much harm has been done now to my reputation. I can’t take it forward any more, every decision is wrapped up in the history and all of the things that frustrate the relationship, even with a new headteacher.” (KL, director of post-16)

“I didn’t want to go now, I had a few more years left in me and I didn’t want to leave it like this…both me and MN, and in fact EF, we’d all have done another couple of years, but we fell on our swords…it wasn’t working, and it was never going to with us still there.” (AB, executive head, interview 4)

“…these decisions were two years late. If you’re going into a federation don’t spend three years farting about with it…but then you would have people like me minding their own back and saying ‘I can’t go, I’m not 55 yet’.” (EF, headteacher, Corton High, interview 2.)

The relationship between the senior staff of the federation schools could be described as dysfunctional. There are many instances when interviewees were clear about why they did not like, respect or enjoy working with the rest of the team. However, this dislike is not directed towards one person. Rather, all members of the senior staff team direct their dislike to different colleagues:

“I never felt isolated, I always felt I had a relationship with [the headteacher of Miller Hall], sometimes we fell out…I had sufficiently good relationship with [the executive head] and [the headteacher of Miller Hall]…I never fell out with [the executive headteacher].” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1)

“…despite EF’s [head of Corton High] demonstrable idiocy, results went up massively.” (AB, executive head, interview 2)

“He [EF, head of Corton High] made me very angry…EF was promoted to the level of his incompetence…he was terrified and the more terrified he got the more angry he got, and the more angry he got, the more he’d listen to [assistant head at Corton High] and the more he listened to him – he is idle and wanted an easy life …so once EF listened to him, he took no notice of AB (executive head) and so on. One of the ways EF operated was that he had a very short fuse, and he would carry on with something then strop hugely and try to be intimidating by his stroppiness and that was extremely upsetting. He did it to me three times. There was an awful lot of ‘I’m in charge, this is my school, don’t you tell me what to do’. There was not acknowledgement that as chair of governors he had no right to talk to me the way that he did talk to me and I’m not happy when people shout at me…I would appear to back down first but I felt that there was a level of misogyny in him and fear and resistance to change as part of the fear process.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 1)

“I love [MN, head of Greenfield] and have a social relationship with her. As a head she was totally and utterly out for Greenfield and I don’t blame her, it was her baby. But sometimes she would have a private conversation with me, then faced with a meeting she would say nothing, not that she was being two-faced, that’s a bit harsh, and not particularly articulate, but that she would say one thing out loud and then keep her council, so you could never actually depend on her approval when it was a governing body meeting.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 1)

“EF (head of Corton High) is absolutely expert at protecting his school and I have to applaud that. Sometimes I sit and think through what we are trying to do and marvel – one bloke, without ever saying no, manages to undermine every move we make, and we don’t even notice him doing it. Stupid though it is, I honestly believe he thinks he is doing the right thing, and he gets really upset when I point out that in doing the right thing he is actually damaging his students’ chances of success…” (KL, director of post-16)

“…I don’t perceive EF as being a very strong character.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 2)

“AB (executive head) had an ego but I think when he was doing the federation stuff he left his ego at the door. He didn’t come in the big I am, but he would talk too long and too much.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1)

Even though the senior staff of the federation point to each other’s deficits throughout the interviews as key barriers to its development, it appears that there are other deeper, underlying constructs that mean that even if these personal and professional deficits could have been ameliorated, there would have still been pace and progress issues:

“So, EF’s silliness didn’t actually set it back too far, because some of the things that need to be done can’t actually be done right now anyway. I just kept altering the timeline as we discovered these. If all of these [other issues] had been sorted, then EF’s issues would have needed to be addressed.” (AB, executive head, interview 2)

There were a number of incidents which interviewees saw as having a damaging impact on the working relationships amongst the senior staff. These incidents were variously described in emotional terms:

“I don’t know if I can even say it.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 2)

“Lie back and put a blanket over your head.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 1)

“…it was extremely upsetting…” (QR, chair of governors, interview 1)

“If I didn’t have a mortgage I would have resigned at that moment.” (KL, director of post-16, field notes)

The most serious of these incidents resulted in the chair of governors being “banned” from the site of Corton High, a most unusual outcome in the sector given that the chair of governors is the legal representative of the governing body and the headteacher’s employer. The head of Corton High, who banned the chair of governors from the site, recounted the incident as follows:

“There was a breakdown in my relationship with QR [chair of governors] and on reflection, [I questioned] some of the decisions made in the past once the relationship had broken down…the relationship broke down very seriously to the extent that I could no longer work with this person [QR]…I was expecting an Ofsted and I didn’t have a chair of governors…any discussion from that point forward was difficult…” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 1)

The executive head felt that he could do nothing about this and that other governors had allowed it to happen:

“…the rest of the governors let him do it. They appointed another governor to do the chair’s role in that school. They gave their tacit approval to the action of banning her.” (AB, executive head, interview 2.)

The chair of governors also felt powerless:

“EF refused to have me on the site…and I couldn’t do anything about it.” (QR, chair of governors, interview 2)

The governing body tried to have a hard-headed discussion about the profile of the two high schools, how best to grow pupil numbers in the schools and protect their reputations. There was a feeling amongst some governors that the Corton High brand would damage the Miller Hall brand. Over a decade, Miller Hall had gained extra almost £750,000 of funding by admitting out-of-catchment[[11]](#footnote-11) post 16 students. These students were from a largely middle-class area, gained good results and therefore boosted the academic profile of Miller Hall. The discussion held between the governors was damaging and, although there was only the one (the governors seemed to learn that this was ‘no-go’ discussion territory following this incident), the conversation about reputation was repeated over and again on both sides through the interviews:

“Miller Hall was the strongest brand, in greenbelt and sucking in 70 odd [out of catchment] students each year.” (AB, executive head, interview 2)

“I was in the meeting and it was ‘how do we stop Corton High damaging Miller Hall’s reputation and brand?’. That was the year that Corton High results were particularly good, so my knee-jerk reaction was not to go with what the governors wanted. I was resistant to change.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 2)

**Minutes from governors’ meeting February 2015**

**Question:**

**Mr [governor] asked what [out of catchment] high school students think about coming to the Corton High site for the Federation Sixth, and with respect being given to EF (head of Corton High), continuing that Miller Hall Sixth has always had good reputation with the [out of catchment] students and parents.**

*KL (director of post-16) stated that the working party had raised this but felt that at this time it was not appropriate to ask as this would lead to rumours and inaccuracies.*

*EF stated that he resented the question; [governor] replied that this was understandable and was why he had worded his question in this manner, acknowledging that it this is about the perception of the Sixth Form with [out of catchment] residents and not necessarily about reality.*

**[Another governor] stated that the Miller Hall brand is portable and asked why the Miller Hall Sixth [Form] brand could not be moved to the Corton High site?**

*KL (director of post-16) stated that this had not been considered and was a valid consideration.*

Some early interactions between senior staff in the two high schools also seemed not to go well. Even when conversations about the school visited were positive, these initial contacts between staff from the schools seem to firmly ‘set’ reputations in the long term:

“…when some of the SLT[[12]](#footnote-12) came to Corton High from Miller Hall to have a look around, they were saying how impressed they were with the behaviour of the kids – like they were surprised! This showed us what they thought of us.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 2)

In fact, the very first contact between staff from the schools seems to have firmly ‘set’ their reputation in the long term.

**4.10 2015 – ruins**

By 2015, the relationships between leaders at all levels were tense. Critical incidents 3 and 4 were recounted by interviewees as the most indicative of the way in which the weak relationships had come to a head. In critical incident 3, EF, (headteacher of Corton High) sends an email and a member of the executive team, KL, director of post-16 education, recounts the content of the email to the headteacher of Miller Hall. In critical incident 4, the chair of the governing body of the schools visits EF to discuss this email. In critical incident 5, EF discusses this email with KL at Corton High.

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| Critical incident 3: A rogue email*This critical incident represents the initial catalyst of a breakdown in relationships between senior members of staff in the central executive team and in both schools. In it, the head of Corton High tells his staff that the chair of governors will resign at the end of the year…something that the chair of governors has specifically asked him not to do.* ***Head’s office, Corton High School***Eric sat at his desk, typing. Whole lines were regularly deleted as he crafted the message to the staff. “Colleagues, just to let you know, the current chair of governors, Queenie Roberts, will be resigning at the end of the academic year ... there will be a total restructure of governance and school leadership teams…”Final check. Send. ***Head’s office, Miller Hall High School***“Colin, you ok? I need to tell you something.” Kev hovered at the door to Colin’s office tentatively.“Kev, come on in, sit down.” Kev saw the tiredness in his body. He wasn’t sitting the way he normally did. He rubbed his face, contorted it into life. “Been a really grueling couple of days, Kev. All of our structures are up in the air. There are questions over the whole of the leadership structure now.”Kev hesitated. Then decided to rip off the sticking plaster. “Everyone at Corton High knows already that Queenie is resigning and there will be a restructure…and you haven’t told the staff here at Miller Hall. You need to tell them before they hear it on the jungle drums.” Colin’s’ eyes widened as adrenaline woke his body and he directed his anger towards this unprofessional infraction. “Who has told them? I just left a meeting where it was agreed that it would be sent to everyone tomorrow. No one is supposed to know.” “Eric sent an email. There.” Kev forwarded it from his phone “It’s in your inbox.”Just the clock ticking. The tiny whir of the fan in the laptop. Five mouse clicks. A distant shriek from a classroom.“F\*@$.” Colin stared at the screen. He didn’t believe it. “Sorry, Kev. I need to go.”“Colin, you sure you’re ok?”“I need to go.” |

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| Critical incident 4: The chair of governors is barred*Again, this is an incident that interviewees say was central to a breakdown in relationships. Following the release of information to his staff, the headteacher of Corton High bans the chair of governors from the Corton High site.* ***Head’s office, Corton High School***“Tell Eric I’m here please. I’ll go straight up to his office.” Queenie Roberts was no less angry now than when she’d stepped into her car to make the two-mile drive across the town. She took the stairs and arrived at Eric’s office in seconds. He was still on the phone to reception. “Queenie, come in. Coffee?” Eric had no idea why she was there. “No thanks Eric. Sit down please.” She smiled carefully. Relaxed deliberately. Tried not to let the anger colour what she was about to say. Opened with a clear indication as to what the issue was. “I have a problem I need to discuss with you about the email you sent about an hour ago.”“How’s that?” Eric hadn’t a clue. He’d sent quite a few…none to her…“In the meeting when I decided to resign at the end of the year…when we decided on a total leadership restructure…we agreed a plan to tell people, didn’t we…?” He didn’t move. No slight nod, no signs he knew or accepted what had happened. “We agreed that we would tell everyone at once tomorrow. We agreed that would be the best, most sensitive way of doing this, and you’ve already told your staff.” Eric began to sweat a little. Heart ran faster, anger building in his chest. “Yes, I did. I sent a message to my staff, so they knew what was going on. Is there a problem with that? This is my school Queenie, how we communicate is little of your business.” Queenie’s attempt to maintain civility slipped away. This is how it had been, the consistent undermining, the quiet words in the background. The sabotage. “As your boss, it is a lot of my business!” Her voice was raised a little. Just a little, though. “We agreed, and moments later you went ahead and did it anyway! I’m here to tell you that it’s had an extremely negative impact down at Miller.” She could see that he was enjoying this a little. He replied, “Look. How I communicate with my staff is my business. I don’t intend wasting any more time talking about…”“Waste time?” Queenie’s eyes widened. “Waste time? You’ve been wasting everyone’s time a lot recently. The extra meetings with other governors, saying you’ll act then just doing nothing, putting barriers in the way of everything we are trying to do! You won’t be allowed to do this, Eric. This is one thing too many. You went against a direct instruction. I will be taking this to the disciplinary board…”“You don’t give me instructions!” Voices louder now. Eric’s secretary’s eyes peered through the window in the door. “Yes, come in Carol! Shut the door.” Carol, Eric’s secretary came in gingerly. “Sorry,” she said, “I heard shouting.”“Carol, start minuting this meeting and be a witness to this please. The chair of governors is here to tell me that I can’t email staff in my own school. She is also accusing me of God knows what and I want this on the record.”Queenie had had time to compose herself. “I’m not playing this game, Eric,” She said.“Nor am I Queenie. So, listen carefully. I won’t have you coming in here, making accusations, especially about something as ridiculous as an email being sent. It’s just…wrong, none of your bloody business what I do here. You don’t run this place, I do, and you’ve stepped over the line today. So, you need to hear this. I won’t take instruction on how to run my school from any governor, let alone one who comes in here being aggressive and accusatory. Especially one who has put this school down at every opportunity for the last 18 months. “It’s also impossible for you or Alan to tell me how to run this school. I’m the head and that’s it. And while we are at it, you’re banned from this school site. If you do come to try to meet with me, I will leave my office and not return until you go away. I will have no meetings with you whatsoever on the basis of your aggression, and if you try to do anything about it you can speak to my solicitor. Yes, I’ve already taken advice. No, there isn’t a thing you can do about it. Now get out and don’t come back.”Various lines went through Queenie’s mind. All sounded way too filmic. She simply said: “Good day, Mr Fox.” She picked up her bag and left. |

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| Critical incident 5: A breakdown in relationships*This final critical incident follows on from incidents 3 and 4 and further demonstrates the breakdown in relationships.* Kev watched the email ping in.“Can I see you next time you’re over here please?” Kev sensed the tone. Reply: “Hi Eric, what would you like to discuss and how urgent is it? I could come over this morning?”“What time do you have today?” “If it’s pressing I could come over today? Otherwise it will be next week.” “It needs to be before tomorrow.” “I’m coming now.”“OK.”Kev’s drive over was a tense one. The emails had been cagey. No sense of what was coming but an undertone of a problem. Another problem. The issue was, Kev never saw them coming. Even when he knew there was a problem, he couldn’t guess what it would be. They came out of nowhere, left of field, sideswiping. Three flights of stairs on an already raised heartbeat didn’t help. A knock, beckoned in.“Coffee?” Eric offered. “That would be lovely, thanks Eric.”A few minutes passed. Kev imagined the kettle boiling, water on coffee grounds, Eric’s awkward dance across the corridor with doors, two cups, cafetière and milk. The coffee arrived, and Eric gave the mouse the last few clicks and turned to Kev. “Have you been forwarding my emails?” Kev’s brain leapt around, trying to identify what the problem would be before he was hit with it. He answered slowly, hesitantly. “Probably…I would think so. If I need to. Why is there a problem?” There was a clear change in Eric’s demeanor. Something hot in his eyes. The mildest twitch in his lip. “You HAVE been forwarding my emails. I’ve known a long time that I couldn’t trust you. This is a gross betrayal of trust. How dare you share confidential information with people outside of this school?” Louder now, Kev was stunned by the sudden turn. “Eric, I’m really not following you. What’s the problem?”“The problem is that you forwarded an email about Queenie’s resignation, didn’t you? Then I get Queenie up here mouthing off all manner of things. That was not your email to forward. How DARE you?”Kev understood *what* had happened. It had been weeks. But he didn’t have a clue why it mattered. Eric continued: “No. This isn’t working. You, doing this job. It isn’t working for anyone is it? At every turn you manage to put Corton High down. Make it feel like the little man. Every opportunity you have. You’re just not working out!”“Yes, I did forward the email that you sent telling your staff that Queenie was resigning and there would be a restructure. Are you going to let me explain…”?A sweep of Eric’s hand, a shaky finger pointing to the door, fiery eyes and tight, angry lips. “Get out of my office.” Stunned, Kev held his coffee. It burnt his hand and he held it tighter. Fight or flight? “Eric, you made me a coffee. I’ll go when I’ve drunk it and I have said what I need to say. You sent an email to your staff telling them something that you shouldn’t. I received that email and took it to the head of Miller Hall. He needed to tell his staff too. People talk across this town and the potential for staff at Miller Hall to feel that everyone except them knows what’s going on is a threat. So, I forwarded your email to Colin. So he would tell the Miller Hall staff. That’s my job, to help manage the relationships across the schools.”“This isn’t working. Your role just isn’t working, Kev. None of us can trust you. Everything you do, my staff have an issue with.”Kev felt the anger swell in him. His volume rose. Losing control just a little: “Actually, Eric, you’ve spent the last two years systematically undermining my ability to do anything. Sabotaging everything we are trying to do. Blocking me getting a proper job description. Saying one thing and doing another. Making a decision and then the next day changing your mind. Claiming you never said things in the first place. You have, at every turn, blocked every good thing I have tried to do in this project and your comment that this isn’t working sounds like a threat. Like a hint at dismissal. If you have lost trust in me then yes, it’s over, the whole project. But you need to remember that the thing that isn’t working here is you, not me.”There was a long pause after this uncharacteristic outburst. A sense that some power had slid from one side of the table to the other. Eric softened. His shoulders lowered. His voice lowered. “Kev, we need to move on from here. I’ve said my piece.”“No, Eric. We can’t move on. You’ve just told me that no one has any trust in me. Said that it’s not working. We can’t move on. We need to sort this out. I probably should never have been appointed. I thought people would get over me being from Miller Hall. I never thought I’d be battling you every day just to get the slightest thing to happen.”  |

# 4.11 New beginnings

The following changes occurred over the academic year 2015/16.

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| August 2015 to August 2016 | Alan resigns from his post as executive headteacher. He is replaced by an executive principal who is substantive headteacher over all three schools. This new executive principal is from outside of the local area. Eric (head of Corton High) takes voluntary redundancy. He is replaced by a non-substantive headteacher, effectively on a deputy headteacher contract.Colin (non-substantive head of Miller Hall) is made redundant and redeployed at Miller Hall, effectively on a deputy headteacher contract as a non-substantive headteacher. Gail (headteacher of Greenfield) is made redundant and replaced by a new non-substantive headteacher, effectively on a deputy headteacher contract.Queenie resigns and is replaced as chair of governors by another ex-Miller Hall governor.Kev resigns. |

Table 4.3: Staffing changes

All participants referred to the negative personal consequences of the federation. Three – the executive head, chair of governors and head of Corton High – called this change these negative personal consequences the: “blood on the carpet”:

“I would have loved to do another few years. I’m nowhere near feeling like retirement yet, nor is Gail. She’d have loved to have done a couple more years ideally – so would Eric too. But it was going nowhere and we’re all bleeding, professionally and personally.” (AB, executive head, interview 3)

In September 2015, the new executive principal took over the substantive headship of all three schools. As mentioned above, only the headteacher of Miller Hall remained, in a demoted position on a deputy headteacher’s contract, as a non-substantive headteacher.

This new executive principal, Steve Timms,[[13]](#footnote-13) reflected in 2017 on the themes that were generated by the interviewees in 2015 (see chapters 3, 3.9).



Figure 4.4: New executive principal’s views on the themes generated by the original interviewees, having led the federation for two academic years.

Steve cites the structure of the governing body as one of the main barriers to the success of the original federation:

“The governing body had a huge amount of detail to get through, and it just couldn’t do that and run such a complex organisation at the same time. Some of them don’t ‘get it’[[14]](#footnote-14), and others do.” (ST, executive principal, interview)

Steve did not see the wider external landscape as a particular issue, but rather simply as unchangeable forces that need to be managed carefully. What was one of the main fears of senior staff at the two high schools, he saw as the most obvious and effective solution:

“…the solution is to knock down both schools and build another…but that’s not going to happen, so we find ways around it.” (ST, executive principal, interview)

However, one of the main barriers to the success of the original federation was its inability to convert to academy status and form a multi-academy trust (MAT) under the previous executive head, Alan Birch. The changes that Steve made since taking up his position shed much light on, and add to, the earlier conclusions about the barriers to success. One fundamental change, according to Steve, has been the schools’ success in becoming a MAT. This change brings more legal formality to the collaboration and properly ties together the funding of all of the schools.

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| **Change** | **Rationale** |
| Becoming a multi-academy trust | Limits the potential of outside bodies taking over schools in the event of an adverse inspection outcome. School reopens as a new legal entity which, in normal circumstances, will not be inspected for three years. This further protects the schools from inspection, giving time to improve standards before an inspection.  |
| Removal of key negative agitators  | Removes the few remaining senior leaders who are not supportive of collaboration between the schools so that the maximum effort can be focused on school improvement. |
| A small trust team with executive functions | Removes many of the powers of a large governing body so that decisions can be made swiftly and in the interests of all of the pupils, not on a school-by-school basis. Removes the need for a large body with multiple factions to be involved in the performance management of headteachers. |
| The creation of each school’s own advisory board (with no executive powers) | Increases the number of people involved in governance to improve oversight and community involvement but limits the powers that they have and their potential negative impact.  |
| Re-establishment of substantive headteachers in each school | Enables the executive headteacher/CEO to hold fully to account each headteacher for the performance of the school. Gives the CEO the powers to discipline and remove headteachers directly. When the CEO is also the substantive headteacher, they cannot “hold [themselves] to account”. (ST, executive principal, interview) |

Table 4.4: List of key changes and rationale

With regard to the re-establishment of substantive headteachers (the position from which CD, head of Miller Hall, was made redundant) is an interesting one. Steve’s view on its importance was:

“I can’t hold myself to account. As the substantive head and CEO that’s what I would be doing.” (ST, executive principal, interview)

When asked how this will be different from the arrangement in the past, Steve felt:

“…the difference now is that I have been given the power to get rid of headteachers by the trust.” (ST, executive principal, interview)

The academisation (see literature review: conceptualising academies, chapter 2, 2.6) of the schools in the federation makes this possible. The academisation changed the governance structure so that all of the legal powers rest with a small trust and not with the wider governing body. The CEO position is created, and the CEO is a trustee. This means that the CEO has the direct power to discipline staff, in a way that Alan lacked in 2012–2015. Even though the powers were, notionally, given to Alan to do this, in employment law these would not stand legally, if challenged.

**4.12: Conclusion**

These findings suggest that recalled inter-organisational history has an impact on leaders’ perceptions and actions and that critical incidents – again, recalled by leaders – can also contribute to the decisions that leaders make. The findings suggest that, in this case, the history of the different organisations caused a range of barriers to positive collaboration such as resistance and sabotage – and, ultimately, disastrous professional consequences for some leaders. Chapter 5 discusses these findings through the critical lenses introduced in chapter 2.

**Chapter 5: Discussion**

**5.1 Introduction**

*This chapter begins with a rationale and some context of Actor*–*Network Theory (ANT) and coopetition, outlining critiques of them as theories/methodologies and the rationale for their value to this study. Further details of these two theoretical lenses can be found in chapter 2 (2.8 and 2.9). I go on to discuss theoretical lenses that I chose not to utilise. The research findings are then discussed, focusing broadly on the clustered themes. A deeper analysis of the critical incidents follows, and the chapter ends with a deeper analysis of the way in which the findings can be understood through the theoretical lenses of Actor*–*Network Theory and coopetition. The discussion through these two critical lenses has particular focus on Callon’s ‘four stages’ of a network coming to be represented by a single entity (1986), and Bengtsson and Kock’s four challenging questions for research in coopetition (2014). The term ‘actant’ is used regularly to describe a person or group of people. When non-human actants are being discussed, this is stated. While this term actant is taken from ANT, it serves clarity to use it throughout this discussion.*

**5.2 Theoretical lenses**

Actor–Network Theory (ANT) (see 2.9) attempts to describe social systems that are infinitely related, inter-reliant and constantly changing. It is a theoretical tool that is in its infancy and is therefore somewhat fluid. It is both a concept and a methodology. During the data-gathering phase, the level of complexity between different parties or stakeholders (which are, in ANT, termed ‘actants’), between the individual, organisational, inter-organisational, local, regional and national necessitated a theoretical construct that could competently account for this. The need was to maintain clarity while embracing the utter complexity of the field. The main draw of ANT in understanding the field of inter-school relationships was that, during the data-gathering phase, it became clear that there were non-human actants having an influence on the human actants. ANT treats social beings and concepts as having equal importance. To my interviewees, non-human actants were of supreme importance. For example, the building of Miller Hall, an imposing manor house from the 1800s, took on the status of an actant. It influenced many actants’ thoughts and subsequently their actions. While ANT is a socio-technological theory, it lends itself well to general networks where some of the non-human actants are not technological artefacts in the traditional sense. ANT is descriptive; it offers a nomenclature to the social world without lending it unnecessary or imposed structure, and the uniqueness and complexity of the schools in Corton were explained coherently through the use of ANT. While ANT helped to describe the actants and their inter-relationships, ‘coopetition’ was an extremely useful theoretical lens through which to understand the dualities of competition and cooperation in a rapidly changing organisation. Just as businesses in an era of rapid technological change and globalisation found themselves in a paradoxical position of being inter-reliant while also competitive, schools, (in an accelerated fashion from 2010, see 2.4) were being encouraged by policy, fiscal issues and, sometimes, moral concerns to work collaboratively. The fields of business and state education in the UK faced curiously similar issues.

**5.3 Deciding on which theoretical lenses to use**

There was a wide range of theoretical lenses that I considered and rejected as I considered how I might make sense of the data I gathered. I rejected some very obvious fields of study in favour of ANT and coopetition. Clearly, there is a growing body of literature on school networks, federations and school-to-school collaboration. Academics attempted initially to define and differentiate between different sorts of school networks (Chapman and Muijs 2013; 2.12) and the description and definition of school networks is an important part of the development of understanding in this field. However, in the context of this thesis, the classification of school networks was not a useful body of literature in that it has, thus far, failed to offer a coherent set of constructs and theories outside of the description of a limited set of commonalities. It does not offer any way of understanding the dynamic between different actants who operate within a school network. It is, to an extent, somewhat too macro to allow a nuanced understanding of school networks. Part of this thesis (chapter 6.1) reflects briefly on how actants’ actions impact on school effectiveness. This was only important to me in so far as the leaders in the federation met their stated aims of educational improvement, because the actual impact on outcomes for pupils was not a part of the research question. School effectiveness research (SER, see chapter 2.4) was considered as a tool through which to make sense of the data. The field of SER is extremely limited in its usefulness in my field of study. This is because, as I found early on in gathering data, leaders’ stated main aim of improving educational outcomes was completely lost amongst their other concerns. The final body of literature and area of theory that I considered was that of school leadership. Within this I considered the literature around collaborative leadership or network leadership. There is much recent literature on this matter. However, the novel nature of leadership across schools in 2011, when I began the EdD course, meant that the literature on leadership lacked the voices of all leaders who found themselves in networks and collaboration. While there were limited examples of leaders’ voices coming into this literature (see 2.12), the voices of the subjugated leaders – those leaders of weaker schools or leaders of schools where collaborations had been unsuccessful – were missing. While I do not use the literature on leadership of schools extensively to analyse my data, opting instead to use ANT and coopetition, I do hope that some of the outcomes enrich the school leadership field in adding the voices of those leaders who find collaboration a destructive experience, and adding to our understanding of the supremely complex ways in which the relationships between schools become the lived experiences of school leaders as a result of multi-layered levers acting on them.

In some of my preliminary reading around research methodologies, I came across Mifsud’s work on ANT (Mifsud 2014). I was initially interested in the claim that ANT, as an “…assemblage of perceptions [and] understandings” (ibid p1) enabled the “exploration of networks and power relations” (ibid). It was clear that power relationships formed a central part of participants’ understandings of what was happening in Corton, as did non-human features such as buildings and other organisations. As a “…family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities and methods of analysis” (ibid p1), ANT offers the researcher a way of both understanding actants and understanding their relationship to one another. It is like an empty shell theory inside which *any* social network can be analysed, interpreted and mapped. It offered me a system to work though complex ideas and through actants of different types (human, systemic, organisational and non-human). When considering the data as a whole, using ANT as a theoretical toolkit made sense because ANT sees divisions (for example, conflict) as the function of the interplay between actors in a network, rather than being inherent in the actor itself. In ANT’s capacity to describe, it does not ‘force’ the data into any particular form. In the case of this study, the use of ANT retained the richness of the data and allowed the voices of participants to be heard.

Similarly, coopetition as a theoretical lens avoided the data being funnelled into a one-dimensional theoretical or conceptual construct. Inherent in the documentation around the federation, the responses of participants to the LEGO® SP sessions and the subsequent interviews were the two factors of competition and cooperation. The literature around coopetition is void of almost any examples from the social sector or from education in particular. As such, I had the freedom to apply tentative models around coopetition to an entirely new field. Indeed, the very definition of coopetition (perhaps as it is a phenomenon associated with rapid international changes and globalisation) is not yet fixed (Bengtsson and Kock 2014 p181). That said, Fernandez et al. (2014 p223) adopt a ‘narrow’ though useful definition: the simultaneous pursuit of collaboration and competition (ibid), which aptly describes the phenomenon in the case study family of schools.

# 5.4 Meeting organisational aims

The original consultation papers for the initial collaboration between schools stated the main aims of the collaborative activities. They are re-produced below in figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1- The stated aims of the federation (consultation document 2012)

The educational benefits loom large in the consultation paper. Gorard’s (2009) skepticism of the educational benefits of these organisational changes is important here. While Gorard talks about misleading comparisons between one timeframe and another as a result of shifting quality standard metrics, the consultation paper bypasses all talk of such metrics. Here we see the policy of changes to school structures as a vehicle for education excellence is not only weakly conceived at the national level, but weakly conceived at the local level. This ethno-case study raises similar questions around the benefits (or otherwise) of experimentation with school structures when, as Gorard rightly points out, pupils have one time through their education. Gorard’s question about the potential experimentation for no perceptible gain is raised by interviewees in this study.

Underneath these claimed educational benefts are another set of suppressed factors. The juxtaposing influences of competition and collaboration create what Raza-Ullah et al. call a “paradox”. For Raza-Ullah et al., the paradox manifests itself in interorganisational relationships. Raza-Ullah et al. propose seeing the relationship of organisations through this paradox lens. However, in the case of Corton, this is not possible. This is because, in this ethno-case study, many of the competitive factors were dynamic, understood in multiple ways and/or hidden. This multiplied the effect of the paradox significantly. These suppressed factors are unique to the education sector and are a product of the interplay between national policy and local and school level response. This is explained in detail below.

# 5.5 The impact of the macro on the micro

The most pertinent macro-external factors impacting on the collaboration were the looming Ofsted inspections for both Corton and Miller Hall schools. Both schools gauged that they were due an inspection at some point in 2015. Neither school had become an academy. School leaders at Corton High knew that they were at risk of an earlier inspection because of poor and declining outcomes. A significant risk was, that in the event of an unfavourable inspection outcome, an external academy chain could be asked by the LA or, latterly, the regional schools commissioner (RSC) to ‘take over’ Corton High. This would mean that the school would be forced to academise and that local people would not be in control of the education of local children. One of the ways of mitigating this risk was the existence of a strong local partner, who, in the event of an unfavourable outcome, could step in to help run the school. In theory, the relationship between Corton High and Miller Hall mitigated this risk because in the event of what leaders saw as the very worst, apocalyptic outcome – an Ofsted judgement of inadequate – they would be able to maintain their independence somewhat, with Miller Hall being able to provide the needed leadership that would convince the RSC that no external partner was needed. This was a very damaging suppressed factor because leaders at Corton High had entered into a relationship that was protective and interdependent in order to maintain its independence – a further juxtaposition and paradox that evidently provided much frustration to leaders and governors across the schools. To further complicate this, Miller Hall during the years 2012–2015 also suffered a decline in outcomes that put it at risk of having an unfavourable Ofsted judgement itself. Leaders at Corton High found themselves in a relationship which they hoped would be protective in the event of a negative inspection, but that was not necessarily going to provide this protection. While the protective nature of the relationships between schools was discussed openly, in the spirit of being stronger together, the need for Miller Hall to be a stronger school was both desirable to leaders at Corton High and unpalatable – unpalatable because of many of the suppressed factors above. What we see here, quite clearly, is a nuanced driver for collaboration to add to Ainscow’s identified drivers (2006). This driver is not voluntarily (initiative), or through the direction of central government (incentive), but an amalgam of philanthropic and initiative drivers (Miller Hall) and internal incentivised drivers (Ofsted).

What no one could have foreseen was the impact of the new inspection framework as a result of the 2011 Education Act. This act brought in short inspections. These short inspections caused a large backlog of inspections and schools with low ‘risk factors’ (such as those gaining a good rating from Ofsted in their last inspection such as Corton High and Miller Hall) were de-prioritised for inspection (this became obvious when inspections did not happen). Thus, the two schools and their leadership teams waited for inspections that did not happen, all the while suffering the negative impact of the complexity of their relationship:

* the risk of Ofsted’s negative judgement,
* the need for a stronger partner to provide a ‘safety net’,
* the need for Corton High’s rapid improvement to mitigate the risk of allowing that stronger partner to provide that ‘safety net, which leaders at Corton High did not want to happen,
* the risk that the stronger partner becomes weaker financially and organisationally.

This tension on the external boundary (Raza-Ullah et al. 2014) forced an uneasy cooperation within an underlying competitive architecture – a factor which Raza-Ullah et al. describe as requiring significant attention, attention which senior leaders did not give, or at least not overtly.

## 5.6 Executives’ personal judgement, perceptions, identity

Bengstsson and Kock (2014) identify two factors that balance the powers of competition and cooperation. Executives’ personal judgement, perceptions and identity; and critical events. Both of these factors are plainly evidenced in the case study federation of schools. All of the senior leaders in the federation were ex-employees/governors of Miller Hall. This was not necessarily by design but through a set of somewhat unavoidable circumstances. The chair of governors from Miller Hall found herself in post because the chair from Corton High died. AB, the executive headteacher, formerly the head at Miller Hall, was the only person with the demonstrable leadership experience to lead an organisation such as a federation of schools. Miller Hall already had the capacity to operate without AB on its site because it had been set up to do this when, in previous years, AB had led a number of other schools at the same time. The business manager at Miller Hall was the only person in the organisation with the qualifications and skills to undertake the federation business manager role. At a time of financial austerity, there was perceived to be no capacity to bring in anyone new from outside the schools without losing existing staff with costly redundancies.[[15]](#footnote-15) One outcome of the whole federation team being Miller Hall employees was that all knew each other well. Working relationships were close. And yet this closeness caused many issues that became more prevalent over time. As work in the federation grew ever more difficult, contentious and fractious, these employees relied more and more on one another to navigate the strain of the work. This bond in adversity spread to other staff as relationships between this senior team and other staff deteriorated. In much the same way as the early relationships were soured in the 1980s, successful collaboration was curtailed through the very support that the federation team gave to one another and the informal support network they created for themselves with their other colleagues. The supportive relationships that they used to fulfil the vision of close collaboration undermined their ability to do so. In the case of the director of sixth form, this was further exacerbated by the line management structure, which left him with the head of Miller Hall as his line manager. Thus, communication about the federation’s turmoil was communicated with the senior team of Miller Hall. As the relationship between the schools became increasingly difficult and as ex-Miller Hall leaders shared their negative feelings with their support networks back at Miller Hall, the potential for the relationship to improve diminished. While it could be argued that for professionals to have such support networks was important – and perhaps unavoidable – their negative effect on the development of the federation is clear. This is a demonstration of a lack of sustenance and balance in the coopetitive relationship (Bengtsson and Johansson 2012) and represents the negative aspects of the uneasy coexistence of cooperation and competition.

**5.7 Power**

Around the time that academics became more interested in the rapidly diversifying school structures in England, Chapman et al. in a series of studies of school federations (2009, 2011, 2014) noted that the link between new school structures such as federations and improved outcomes for pupils was most notable in ‘performance federations’. In a performance federation, a weaker school is partnered with a stronger one so that the weaker school improves. There are numerous cases of this happening successfully. In the early days of Corton’s federation, governors were well aware that Alan Birch, the executive headteacher of the new federation, had engaged in such a performance federation from 2007 until 2012. This arrangement had seen Alan as the executive headteacher of Miller Hall and a failing secondary school, school X, in a neighbouring town. This failing school went from ‘inadequate to good during his leadership. As a result, governors and other leaders understood the value of such arrangements. The arrangement in Corton was identical in some ways, and different in others. This was because, although Corton High was a weaker school than Miller Hall in terms of its outcomes for pupils, the context of school inspection had changed considerably.

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|  | **Miller Hall and Corton High** | **Miller Hall and School X** |
| Ofsted inspection outcome | Corton High had an inspection in 2012 where it was judged to be good. Corton High was expecting an inspection in 2014. | School X inspected by Ofsted and judged inadequate. |
| Outcomes for pupils  | There was a significant decline in outcomes for pupils from 2012 to 2014.  | At the time of Alan Birch’s involvement, outcomes for pupils were very poor. |
| Changes to Ofsted’s inspection focus | Over the time of the decline, new methodologies were established by the Department for Education and Ofsted for assessing pupils’ progress as opposed to attainment. While standards could be argued to have declined over the years 2012–2104, some of this decline was because of the way that progress was measured.  | At the time of Alan Birch’s involvement, progress measures were not well developed nor a particularly robust way of measuring a school’s success. Inspection teams focused more on threshold attainment measures such as the proportion of pupils gaining five A\*–C grades at GCSE.  |
| How the sixth form is judged by Ofsted | By 2014, new progress measures and methodologies had been introduced by the DfE and Ofsted. As such, the sixth form had a separate judgement in the report and progress from pupils’ starting points was measured. Sixth form judgements would feed proportionately into final ‘overall effectiveness’ judgements.  | School X’s sixth form was an off-site collaboration with two other schools. As such, it was under the partial control of two other schools and did not raise or lower the ‘overall effectiveness’ grade of the school. At the time of the inspection, sixth form progress measures were ill-defined and poorly developed.  |

Table 5.1: The impact of inspection and inspection timing

The above demonstrates the issue with performance federations during a time when the assessment regime for deciding on how well a school is performing was fluid. What constitutes a high-performing school? How can partners be sure that this high performance is being sustained? What is it about high performance that leads to the ability for a higher performing school to have a positive impact on a lower performing school? Most importantly, how do we know for sure which schools are providing an adequate education and which are not? As the way in which schools are judged changes, schools which fall into an inspection window[[16]](#footnote-16) are judged under different frameworks of assessment. Whether or not this is fair and equitable is beyond the scope of this thesis. What can be stated with certainty is that whether or not a school is performing well is judged in a public sense by an inspection. The inspection is a shorthand for all stakeholders to understand the quality of a school. While Corton High waited for an inspection and its outcomes for pupils declined, there was no external scrutiny of this and no public record. Whereas school X had the public record of its failings, and these had to be accepted by the school, Corton High did not. This led to a situation where governors and leaders in Corton High required the support and protection of a stronger partner but had no compulsion to accept or admit that standards were in decline. This is demonstrated by the fact that the initial consultation document made no mention of the lower or unacceptable pupil outcome standards at Corton High. There was therefore no understanding that a performance federation was in place, when what was needed and what had been put in place was in fact a performance federation. This was caused also by the timing of the Corton High’s school inspection: were Corton High to have had a negative inspection, the acceptance of a performance federation would be likely to have taken place. This complex interplay between the role of partners, the impact of accountability measures and leaders’ inability to address what they called “the elephant in the room” led to significant and drawn-out conflicts. What was publicly in place was a collaborative approach where working together would bring about improvements. What needed to be in place was an explicit acknowledgement of Corton High’s failings so that the mechanisms of a performance federation could be put in place. This was not necessarily because Corton High *was* weaker but was because senior members of the leadership of the federation believed this to be the case. The belief by federation leaders that a performance federation should be in place curtailed the ability for leaders to properly collaborate. Chapman et al. (2009) see a softening in the perceived threat of changing school structures. This is a simplistic view: while one ethno-case study does not make a case against the point that a shift of mindset has happened, it does make the case that there has been insufficient account of the complexity of school-to-school collaborations.

This situation was made more complex as the changes to the accountability framework caused outcomes at Miller Hall to also decline. The stronger partner, the potential supporter of a Corton High in trouble, found itself battling declining standards in 2013–2016 for a number of reasons, including the changes to headline accountability measures.[[17]](#footnote-17) This amply demonstrates Gorard’s point (2007) that the success of changes to schools structures cannot be adequately described using pupil-level performance data. Furthermore, we see another negative consequence of the local use of performance data: that the mandate to lead or emerge as a stronger partner is eroded considerably. This speaks of trust for a schools effectiveness locally being undermined through sudden changes to the ways in which schools are evaluated through performance data. Interviewees said that this decline curtailed Miller Hall’s ability to command respect and lead a performance federation. There was no formally stated stronger partner nor was there one that rose naturally as a stronger partner. This lack of clarity as to who was able to morally take the lead on school improvement caused huge inertia and, according to some interviewees, was the reason that so little was achieved by the federation between 2012 and 2015. In summary, while many leaders accepted covertly that this was a performance federation, the stronger partner, Miller Hall, lacked the credentials to convince the weaker partner, Corton High, to follow its lead. The lack of any inspection activity over the life of the federation up to 2015 meant that there was no public record of any failings in either school to push the performance federation agenda. Where two school leadership teams working together who have similar standards might genuinely feel the desire to work together for mutual improvement, this feeling was absent, as the reasons above demonstrate. Thus, the federation in Corton did not fit into any of the usual categories of school-to-school collaborations. Simkins (2015) identifies a number of variables that influence the character of “emerging school groups” (ibid p7.) He suggests a number of variables, the interplay between which causes the specific conditions of the way in which a federation operates. The variables are emboldened in the discussion below. They warrant further and deeper consideration in the case of the Corton federation.

The federation was a **small-scale**, mixed-phase, **locally based** one. It is when **status differentiation, initiation, management and orientation** are considered that the picture becomes highly complex, even in the seemingly small and simple family of schools in this study. Different actors had different views on the status differentiation. There was no single published or broadcast view on this matter from any leaders in the federation. There were, however, many different views shared on different platforms. Newspaper articles spoke of the benefits of having two strong high schools and speeches by leaders at public events celebrated the achievements of both schools. Within this, there is the recognition of leaders that both schools have something valuable to offer to the relationship. What were missing were quantifiable, demonstrable shared notions of what each offered. In terms of initiation, Simkins’s parameters for the variable range from “created from the centre” to “built from below”. This captures, perhaps, the sense that in non-performance federations, collaborations which are initiated from within the schools are strong because they lack the external drivers (such as an adverse Ofsted judgement, LA or RSC pressure) and are steeped in local context and local need as opposed to some imposed power from outside. However, in the case of Corton, the initiation *was* from the stronger school, which maintained that it was not because of its strength that it wished to federate.

**5.8 Relative institutional power, moot points, the “elephant in the room”**

One of the key barriers to the success of a positive collaborative relationship between the schools was that, while all of the actors shared a knowledge of their different and shifting powers, agency and weaknesses, these were never overtly discussed in the official contexts of minuted meetings between the headteachers and executive headteacher, or the governing body. Considered from one point of view, this is entirely understandable. To discuss the weakness of one’s own organisation was to openly admit weaknesses in a forum where this was a danger to one’s perceived personal and professional strength. Conversely, and just as damagingly, to discuss one’s own sources of organisational agency risked accusations from the other schools of power-play and risked raising the issue of a takeover. As a result, the “elephant in the room”, as all but Corton High school leaders termed it, was that at the beginning of the federation’s life, Miller Hall had more organisational power and enough agency to take over Corton High. As outlined above, this agency waned as its headline outcomes fell and Miller Hall faced a major financial crisis. The structure of this particular federation of schools (within which there was an executive headteacher outside of the staffing structure of the individual schools) should have enabled these conversations to be held despite the timidity of the individual heads, all of whom had much to lose should they be threatened by another school’s increasing power and agency. However, the executive headteacher was not able to do this. This merits further exploration and analysis. The executive head of the federation was headteacher of Miller Hall. Because of this, he was perceived by other interviewees as still having very strong personal and loyalty ties to Miller Hall. His contract, even throughout his tenure working for the federation, remained as the substantive headteacher of Miller Hall, with the other two schools in the federation paying a proportion of his salary in year 2 of the federation onwards. Therefore, at no point while he was in post as executive headteacher was he formally or legally working for Corton High or Greenfield in anything other than a subcontracted capacity. Regardless of the executive headteacher’s motivations for designing or keeping this structure (this structure was his design), it undoubtedly created suspicion and a lack of trust. It also meant that whenever difficult decisions had to be made that negatively impacted the heads of Corton High and Greenfield, the heads could legally (and one did) decline to do what he asked of them. In this context of low trust, high anxiety, rapid internal and external change in the education sector, these seemingly small details of contract, although never broadcast, assumed far greater meaning and relevance. The ability for leaders to act in what Hargreaves (2007) calls a sustainable way was limited by this low-trust, high anxiety professional environment. Motivations for decisions were seen in the light of perceived allegiances and attempts to build trust by the executive principal were thwarted. His agency was profoundly undermined because of these sensitivities. As a result, AB had to use his power diffusely, vicariously through other actors. This was sometimes successful, but often not.

**5.9 The use of external actors to achieve senior leaders’ aims**

The extent to which the executive headteacher could meet the stated aims of the projects was so undermined that in two contexts, others from outside of the paid employees of the organisations were engaged to help meet these aims. These were the chair of governors (Queenie) and an LA consultant. At various points from 2012 to 2015, Queenie was asked to take on the full management responsibility for the headteacher of Corton High. This was because of the lack of role power that the executive headteacher had: in law, the head of Corton High was the ‘substantive’ headteacher, and was legally only answerable to the chair of governors. While there may be contexts within which a lack of legal power would not be such a barrier to an executive headteacher, in this context, over time, the executive head felt that he could not effect the changes needed to make Corton High an effective school, to protect it from an adverse Ofsted outcome, or to engage it properly as a partner in the federation. This is not a situation that the governors were blind to. On the request of the executive headteacher, in an attempt to make clear the roles, structures and hierarchy, the heads from all three schools and the governors had agreed (in writing) that the executive head would have ultimate power and be able to veto decisions, make final decisions and act as substantive headteacher of all three schools. This agreement was not legally binding, however, and on various occasions when the heads of Greenfield or Corton High did not wish to do what had been agreed, they would simply not do things. As outlined in critical incidents 3, 4 and 5 (Chapter 4, 4.10), the relationships between the chair of governors, the director of sixth form and the headteacher of Corton High were turbulent and dysfunctional.

So, there was a set of factors preventing the executive headteacher from moving into what would have been a natural position, a position of neutrality in terms of each of the three schools. This led to his remaining the substantive head of Miller Hall, unbalancing the hierarchy both for him and the non-substantive head of Miller Hall. These were:

* his proximity to retirement and his need for job security,
* a lack of trust between the governors and executive headteacher, and flux in the governing body that prevented any increase in levels of trust,
* the fragile nature of the federation which had the potential to lead to restructure, a restructure from which he was immune if he remained as substantive head of Miller Hall.

Other factors (which were not acted on) caused the imbalance, tension and lack of resolution in the hierarchy. These were:

* the lack of trust for the executive headteacher *because* of him being a direct employee of Miller Hall,
* his immunity from redundancy in a context where all other senior staff were fearful of their displacement if a restructure took place.

To say that these two sets of factors – factors to resolve the hierarchy and factors to maintain the hierarchy – are simply complex is to miss the point that at the heart of them were a lack of trust between any leaders and governors, and a sense of self-preservation on the part of the executive headteacher. The need to act vicariously, disastrous in some contexts as seen in the critical incidents throughout this thesis, emanated from the perfectly balanced factors for change and drivers for inaction in terms of the leadership structure. Tidstrom (2014) identifies a lack of understanding of these tensions. Her view that tensions are typified and classified in the literature is a valid one which this ethno-case study demonstrates: the drivers for collaboration and for competition seem to have been in such perfect balance that inaction was the result. What is needed is a mapping of the interrelations and complexity of the tensions, which this thesis offers.

The outcomes of these critical incidents maintained the fragility of relationships, lack of trust and many of the other negative consequences for other actors in the schools such as the chair of governors, director of sixth form and the headteachers of Miller Hall and Corton High.

Much discussion took place in governors’ meetings about the relationship between the schools being a partnership of equals. This attempt to maintain the status and self-esteem of leaders and governors at Corton High was an important strategy. It had taken decades to come to a situation where the two schools could work together. The legal status of a hard federation with one governing body undoubtedly showed the world the schools’ resolve to come closer and stopped any party easily leaving the federated relationship. Within this external reputational and legal boundary, a very fragile relationship existed. As the chair of governors suggested, the head of Corton High’s fear of losing control of his school led to anger about loss of control and spilled into even more resistance (see chapter 4.9). Both the executive headteacher and chair of governors attributed a part of this siege mentality to the fact that the quality of staff from Miller Hall made the Corton High equivalents feel inferior, given that the chair of governors, executive head, business manager and director of the post-16 provision were all from Miller High. As a result of these perceptions, factions formed in the governing body. One of these factions was semi-official, and interviewees refer to it as “senior governors” (see chapter 4.9). This group of senior governors was a feature of the Miller Hall governing body from before the hard federation existed. The structure was simply adopted by the new governing body, although the existence of a group of more senior governors who met outside of the main governing body meetings was never overtly discussed. This lack of discussion appears to have led to a feeling that other informal governing body factions were acceptable, which led to further fragmentation of the governing body – the very body that should have been able to transcend the power struggles occurring at levels below them. As the chair of governors noted, these pre-meetings were known about by all, but not discussed. They became a tacit aspect of all governors’ ongoing attempts at decision-making. Added to this were informal and ad-hoc governor meetings with slightly more junior staff (see 4.9) that staff found ‘uncomfortable’ and a toxic, ongoing flow of incoherent information flowing between all levels of leadership and the governing body.

**5.10 Critical incidents**

It is fruitless to attempt to establish the true motivations of the leaders of the schools in the 1980s through the critical events presented in this thesis. While we have second-hand accounts of their interactions, the ex-headteachers of both schools have now died. Their leadership of these schools was so long ago that attempting to gain a sense of truth is futile. What is clear is that for over three decades, two schools merely two miles apart never collaborated in a meaningful way. Even when collaboration was an important, structural part of their existence, the chair of governors asserted that nothing meaningful had been achieved. What can be established is the impact that the early critical incidents had on recent leaders, because they tell us this in their own words. The more contemporaneous critical incidents in this thesis offer a different form of validity. This validity is in their recency, the first-hand accounts that we have and their triangulation with other evidence. What is clear about all of these critical incidents is that the interviewees themselves feel that critical incidents have a profound impact on the perceived failure of the federation. These critical events are important in understanding the relationship between schools in Corton because they are the points at which there are, what Tidstrom and Hagberg-Andersson (2012) view as key turning points in the evolution of relationships. Building on this view, this thesis sees critical events, additionally, as crucial to actants’ understandings of history, and, so drivers of future balance or imbalance in competition and collaboration. Like Tidstrom and Hagberg-Andersson, I see critical events as the right points of ‘departure’ to form an external understanding of the developing network.

#### **5.11 Critical incident 1** – **ancient history (see 4.41)**

This particular incident was cited by the ex-headteacher of Corton High, and referred to by her successor Eric Fox and the executive headteacher, Alan. They all view this critical incident as the start of the poor relationship between the schools. The two headteachers involved in this incident died relatively recently, but this story continued to work as a shorthand for both Miller Hall and Corton High. In their recounting of this story, leaders of Corton High show that through successive headteachers there was a lack of trustworthiness and a sense of successive headteachers at Miller Hall using their elevated status as the leaders of the more affluent school to make a power grab. The function this story plays is that of an exemplification of hereditary mendaciousness associated with educating pupils in a leafier, easier environment and of an inverse snobbery on the part of Corton High. Whereas Corton saw the story negatively, Miller Hall leaders viewed the headteacher involved, Henry, as a somewhat wily character capable of such Machiavellian works. They describe themselves as doing the opposite of what their predecessors had in the past.

**5.12 Critical incident 2** – **Miller Hall reaches out (see 4.8)**

This incident, recounted by interviewees from Miller Hall, was the point at which the governors of Miller Hall chose the path of collaborating with Corton High as opposed to an ‘all-out war’. To move to shut Corton High was one of the options, but, according to the chair of governors at Miller Hall and later of the hard federation, it was decided that this path was not in the best interests of Corton High. The then head of Miller Hall (AB, who became the executive headteacher) began to try to develop a relationship with Corton High to bring about better collaboration.

Another early incident was mentioned by more than one interviewee. This incident is the very first meeting between the governors at Corton High and the then executive headteacher of Miller Hall and of another school in a neighbouring town, Alan Birch:

 “…it went wrong from the start, he was invited to come to speak to us and it turned into the Alan roadshow. He arrived on a very big motorbike and did this presentation which was basically about himself and everything he had done. This turned us all off straight away and his role was undermined from that point.” (EF, head of Corton High, interview 2.)

Regardless of this feeling, governors, including the ones at this meeting that EF describes, willingly voted to enter into a federation with Alan as the executive headteacher. Furthermore, it was AB’s role as one of the first successful executive headteachers in England that gave the three schools the confidence to create a federation at a time when this was very new and risky.

#### **Critical incidents 3 and 4** – **the chair of governors is ‘barred’ (see 4.10)**

To analyse this critical incident, we need to establish why it happened, the impact it had on the federation and what it tells us about the underlying architecture of the federation’s relationships. EF was effective in his banning of QR from Corton High’s school site. Following this critical incident, QR did not hold a meeting with EF on that site again, nor did she participate in any business pertaining specifically to Corton High. The incident was precipitated by a chain of events. Underneath these events are some of the issues referred to earlier in this chapter. For example, the email showing that EF, the headteacher of Corton High, had shared embargoed information with his staff was shared with the headteacher of Miller Hall, CD, as a result of KL’s close relationship with CD. As the critical incident shows, KL’s intention was that staff at Miller Hall had the same information as those at Corton High, thus limiting negative feelings amongst the staff. That said, it is questionable whether the information would have been shared if KL had not have had such a close relationship with CD, his line manager. CD’s swift move to speak to QR about this leaking of information relied on his close, long-term relationship with QR. QR’s response was a result of her sense of responsibility to CD and outrage that EF, head of Corton High, would contravene her express wish that no one would know until a specific time. The ensuing, heated argument that led to the banning of the chair of governors from the site had at its core EF’s *ability* to do this. His being found to have gone against a direction of his employer (QR) caused the confrontation. His assertion of the inappropriateness of QR’s action and his role as the legally substantive headteacher allowed the banning to happen. EF would not have been able to do this without the support of other members of the governing body, something which he later got. This suggests that the fractured governing body as a result of its structure (being made up of members of the two historical bodies) was one of the causes of the total breakdown in the leadership’s relationships. The action of banning the chair from the school site created a higher risk of an adverse Ofsted judgement according to EF. He uses this fact as evidence that his banning of QR was based on a moral decision that transcended organisational concerns:

“…I was stuck expecting an Ofsted [inspection] without a chair of governors because of that…it was a massive risk…but there was no way I could be anywhere near her…I just didn’t trust her.” (EF)

This is one of the acts of sabotage that other interviewees referred to in interviews. It was a successful act with multi-layered motivations and profound consequences. It was made possible, not just by the circumstances that presented themselves but the lack of a clear, appropriate hierarchy or line management structure. EF was able to take these actions because he had no one to whom he was responsible and the perceived legal ability to make decisions in isolation from other leaders. Relationships had broken down considerably over time that made both EF and QR respond to opportunities to undermine one another, QR in responding to the email leak, and EF in making threats over alleged financial impropriety. Both EF and QR were not restrained by the potential negative consequences of their actions. EF was close to retirement and had compromising information pertaining to QR.

#### **5.13 Critical incident 5** – **A breakdown in relationships (see 4.10)**

Critical incident 3 led to critical incident 4. While EF had no information akin to the misconduct alleged to have been perpetrated by QR, EF saw the sharing of the email as ‘leaking’, something he described as a: ‘a gross betrayal of my trust’. This critical incident could be described as opportunistic, the second opportunity to maintain Corton High’s independence by attacking federation leaders. This imbalance in cooperation and competition was caused by EF’s ‘personal judgement, perception and identity’, but had negative consequences for all involved and the relationships between leaders overall. Over a year after the incident, EF said that the incident showed KL being used as “…everyone’s whipping boy”, because KL was used by both sides to effect change. This suggests, whether deliberate or not, that the use of KL to further different actors’ personal agendas was thoroughly undermining any sense of unity needed to bring about much-needed collaboration. The ultimate result of this interaction was the resignation of KL from the federation team.

**5.14 The critical lenses of ANT and Coopetition**

Raza-Ullah, Bengtsson and Kock (2014; see 2.8) suggest that the state of coopetition – the: “…simultaneous pursuit of cooperation and competition” (ibid p189) – is on the increase due to a range of factors “motivat[ing] or forc[ing]” (ibid) organisations to engage in such activities. This is the case in the education sector and is demonstrably the case in the situation in Corton. As mentioned earlier (2.8), Raza-Ullah et al. offer a simple model of “boundaries” in their work: “internal” and “external” boundaries. Applying this model to the situation in Corton offers a profound insight into the specifics of the case study schools and how coopetition operates in public services, particularly the education sector. It is important to note that the factors pushing the two high schools, Corton High and Miller Hall, together are complex. They fall into two categories: those overtly stated by school leaders; and those evident given a fuller overview of the data. This latter category I call ‘suppressed factors’ because they are the undiscussed factors that did not make it into open discussion amongst governors or senior leaders during the years 2012–2015.

**5.15 Actor–network theory**

As mentioned in chapter 2 (2.9), ANT assists us in describing a problem. What follows is the use of ANT to describe the problems outlined above. The first, and possibly most important, point to make about the actants is that all existed before the formation of the federation. This nuance had an impact on the way in which actants treated and understood each other. The memories of the actants’ past served to throw into sharp relief their current status and power, and subtly affected the dynamics between actants. One key example of this would be that of the executive team. This executive team must be understood in a number of ways:

1. As an actant in its own right
	1. The existence of an executive team was, to some other actants such as the heads of Miller Hall and Corton High, a driver towards negative behaviour. The costs associated with this team formed parts of other more abstract actants: finance, deficit and redundancy. The executive team represented, to some actants, the seepage of power away from their schools, the empire building of individual actants and the reason for the financial crisis. The executive team’s main offices were all situated at Miller Hall, and all of their contracts remained, at all times, at Miller Hall. They were all originally Miller Hall employees.
2. As made up of individuals
	1. Of course, the executive team were made up of three individuals who had a personal history regularly narrated by some actants as a negative response to the executive team’s existence. Other actants are also related to this: the executive headteacher’s motorbike, the executive business manager’s large executive car, for example.

The point here is that the number of actants when seen in multi-level way multiplies. This is useful when analysing the power of these actants but has the potential of falling into one of ANT’s main downfalls, which is the over-description of networks to the extent that the macro view is totally lost. Punctualisation is the process by which a complex actor network becomes an entity and is related to other networks. In the case of this study, these other networks are those outside the federation that have an impact upon it. I made no attempt to understand these external networks in any other way than to see their impact on the federation and the way in which they became punctualised (the process by which they became related to the federation). Ofsted, the school inspectorate, was one of these external networks, and potentially the most interesting one. In the four years of federation that this thesis covers, Ofsted, as a complex actor network in its own right, was discussed extensively, and became the leverage of many of the actants’ actions, as outlined in table 5.1. However, its impact as a network (which warrants extensive further study) is fascinating in that no contact with Ofsted as an organisation was had by any of the actants at any point over the time that this thesis covers. The way in which Ofsted as an actor network becomes related to the federation is through the information about its work feeding in to other actors through Ofsted’s publications, published reports and stories handed down from leader to leader from outside of the network. To an extent, Ofsted’s power as an actant/actor network relies on this reputation created by others through the narratives they weave about inspection practice, as opposed to anything actually done by Ofsted as a network or the actors within it.

Other actor networks became punctualised in similar ways, through actants within the federation sharing their understandings of the ways in which they operated, often without any secure knowledge. These actants were the LA, central government, parents, the community in general and pupils. Translation in ANT is the process which allows a network to become represented by a single entity, whether that is an individual or the network as a whole. Callon (1986) proposes that this network consists of four stages, the first being *“****problematisation****”*. The problematisation is the prerequisite for the existence of the network. What follows problematisation is a well-defined problem and a sense of dependency on individuals or the network to solve these problems. The problems faced by the schools in Corton are laid out in detail earlier in this thesis, in terms of the stated aims given to governor before the establishment of the federation. Where actors share understanding of their problems, they develop a dependency on whichever actors seek to solve, or are efficacious in solving, these problems. However, I argue that these problems are not well defined because there was no shared understanding between the actors.

My findings show radically different views of what the problems are – and, indeed, the fact that different problems were being faced at different times by different schools. What ensued was actually a lack of dependency on the individual who could be argued to have had the agency to solve the problems, the executive headteacher, and subsequent dependency on a raft of different actors. This shaped the network in a way that fragmented it and meant that it met its stated aims weakly. According to Callon, the next phase is *“****Interessement****”*. In this stage, actors are locked into roles which aim to solve the problem and strengthen the developing network. These roles are outlined graphically below. The third stage is the process of “***enrollment****”*, where the actors have their roles defined, and the inter-relation of their roles becomes clear. Interessement and enrollment are discussed together, below.

Figure 5.2: Interessement: actors are placed to solve the problematisation

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Job title** | **Intended role within the network** |
| Executive headteacher | Line manage all senior staff; lead the organisation strategically |
| Executive business manager | Align business functions across the schools |
| Federation director of post-16 | Align post-16 across the schools to begin a fuller alignment across all year groups |
| Headteachers  | Lead individual schools |
| Governors  | Oversee strategic leadership in all schools |

Figure 5.3 Horizontal and vertical tension

One of the key difficulties in Corton was the horizontal tension, within each role, and the vertical tensions, between the roles. I argue below that horizontal tensions militated positive interessement, and vertical tensions militated positive enrolment (stage 3 of the process). While Callon (ibid) proposes four stages, I see these stages as ‘nested’ and highly inter-related. Horizontal tension within the role came from the differences between actors’ official job descriptions, their personal perceptions of their roles, and the ways in which they found their roles playing out as the network developed. The executive headteacher’s ability to line manage all senior staff was limited by the fact that he was non-substantive. His ability to lead the headteachers was stymied because, apart from the headteacher of Miller Hall, each headteacher was the lawful, autonomous leader of their school. When a headteacher decided not to do what was agreed, there was no recourse. In addition, governors outsourced the setting of performance management targets to an independent third-party consultant in an attempt to ensure that these were robust targets with outside scrutiny. As AB (executive head) explained in an interview, this further limited his ability to hold these leaders to account. This demonstrates not only a negative outcome of the interessement (remembering that interessement and the whole ANT is not a model that makes a value judgement but describes a process) but also highlights one of the main issues with governance: the lack of governor knowledge and understanding in the formation of a federation and latterly a MAT. The executive business manager’s role was much more straightforwardly ‘locked-in’, horizontally, during interessement. As the headteachers gave up their role as line managers of their respective business managers, the executive business manager had a clear role and clarity of responsibility, and was seen by all actors as being highly effective federation-wide. The role of the federation director of post-16 education was similar to that of the executive headteacher in its horizontal tensions. Throughout the time that he did the role, there was no job specification in existence. His view of what the role entailed was gleaned from what the executive headteacher (not his line manager) asked of him. So, while KL had a clarity of his role in the network, this does not match his job description (as none existed). This caused horizontal tension. The schools’ headteachers had a complex position in the network as it developed. This complexity and an accompanying lack of clarity led to many of the tensions. As stated above, the executive headteacher remained the substantive headteacher of Miller Hall. This created a power imbalance, as the two other headteachers were substantive heads and had far more agency in their own schools. In effect, however, each headteacher played exactly the same role in their school. The head of Corton High (EF) stated that he perceived this power imbalance as being unfair on the head of Miller Hall. Governors also took on new roles within the network as it evolved. They went from being the governor of one school to governors of three, although as the chair of this body (QR) made clear, much work was done to bring this group together and enable it to work as one body. The aim was that this group would see the three schools as one entity. This never happened, and the factions within the body emerged at regular intervals. Again, there was horizontal tension between official roles, actors’ perceptions of these roles, and the way these roles played out in the network.

The final stage, according to Callon, is *“****mobilisation****”*. In this stage, the actors work within the network to solve the problem. The point here is not whether the networks operate well but the way in which the networks operate. ANT does not place a value on the way in which a network operates but describes its operation. In this case the sub-networks, and actors, contributing to the mechanisms of the whole network were operating in conflict with one another.

The main conflicts within the network happened because of the interplay between horizontal and vertical conflicts as the network developed. These conflicts within the network were punctuated and reified by what ANT calls “***artefacts and quasi-objects****”*, including the buildings themselves. One startlingly obvious critique of ANT is that, while it allows researchers to explore the impact of non-human actants, these non-human actants lack any agency. Two important artefacts which became actants as a part of the emerging network were Miller Hall, the old manor house and Corton High, a 1950s, arguably less aesthetically pleasing building. These two buildings reflect other actors’ notions of the socio-economic mix of pupils within them and served as shorthand to punctuate headteachers’ attitudes, actions and motives. They also served as a shorthand for them to interpret other human actants’ motives. In this way, they became a part of the network, while not actants in their own right. These artefacts were identified from the LEGO® SP sessions and featured in conversations between leaders.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Artifact | Description | Contribution to the network |
| Email addresses | While Miller Hall employees moved to an ‘@cortonfederation’ email address, Eric Fox refused to do this at Corton High, keeping a ‘@cortonhigh’ suffix | Corton High maintains independence. Its outward facing emails do not show that it is a part of the Corton Federation |
| Coffee | At all meetings in the Corton High building, Eric Fox provided freshly brewed coffee. He served this personally.  | Eric Fox demonstrates hospitality and sophisticated taste.  |
| The council estate; pupils’ deprivation | While Miller Hall was situated in an area of mixed hosing stock, Corton High was situated very close to an estate of council housing. Miller Hall’s main pupil deprivation indicator was half that of Corton High | Miller Hall works in easier circumstances than Corton High. Corton High educates ‘tougher’ children. |
| The motorbike | The executive principal drove a motorbike and, very occasionally, arrived at meetings on this.  | The executive principal is financially well off, flashy.  |
| Signage, logos, letterheads | Corton High rejected every version (22 versions) of a new logo designed to bring together the branding of the two post-16 bodies.  | Corton High maintains independence. Its outward-facing emails do not show that it is a part of the Corton Federation. |
| The farms and hills | Corton High serves a population that includes dozens of small farming villages. Its physical location on the outskirts of Corton, near these villages, held importance. | Corton High is authentic, independent, serves the real people of Corton.  |
| The sports hall | Corton High had a large sports hall, and far superior sports facilities compared to Miller Hall. | Miller Hall is old, traditional, fixed. Corton High is forward thinking, new, young.  |

Table 5.2 Artefacts and their contribution to the network

Together, these artefacts operated within the network and created a set of easily understandable, sharable ways of actors understanding one another. These understandings were perpetuated through these artefacts and became part of the network. It appears that, as they were shared, either through conversation between leaders in the individual schools or through experiences, these artefacts became embedded into the networks and systems of understanding, or schema, of leaders.

The assertion that artifacts such as a motorbike, signage and email addresses are actants extends the definition of actant. Traditionally, an actant would be a technological and be able to replicate human actions, tastes and decisions (mainly cultural) in new ways, for example, algorithms that choose cultural content for a listener to music (Shiga 2007). The artefacts presented above do just this: meaning is ascribed to non-human actants and they become a part of the network. However, a key difference in the case of the Corton schools is that the human actants ascribe those meanings directly through the non-human actants. The meanings are negotiated between human actants to form stable, new meanings to the non-human actants. These become shorthands in the network for actants to understand one another and form the basis for leadership decisions. Thus, what was missing was some leadership control over these non-human actants to minimalise their negative influence in the network. The non-human agency, as proposed by Shiga (ibid.), is ascribed to the non-human actant.

The artifacts appear to have subsequently affected the interactions of actors. In summary, ANT allows us to describe the formation, development and working of a network. In the case of Corton, it allows us to see that actors’ fluidity of role, tensions between roles and within them, and quasi-objects formed a network that weakly met its stated objectives and proved destructive according to many of the participants.

# 5.16 Coopetition

The literature around coopetition is in its infancy. As such, the models that theorists propose do not currently take account of a wide enough range of organisations or circumstance of coopetition such as in the education sector. Muijs and Rumyantseva (2013) identify that coopetition is currently a feature of the activities of universities and sometimes colleges. However, while schools often attempt to improve their standing comparatively to other schools, the competition is rarely existential. This is changing (ibid). Most of the literature on coopetition talks about specific departments within businesses cooperating within a wider competitive environment. School federations and MATs are different in nature. The change from a single school to a school as a part of a MAT or hard federation, for example, is at a governance level. The architecture of a MAT and hard federation is that of a single trust whose members are fully responsible for all schools in within the family. As such, some of the models proposed by the coopetition literature need to be seen in the context of a wholly different organisational structure. It is this very structure of a single board with responsibility for all schools that caused friction, conflict and tension in Corton, especially given that this board was made up of remnants of the old governing boards and led by a Miller Hall chair. One of the main collaborations in Corton was the joint sixth form. It aimed to fully integrate Miller Hall and Corton High’s sixth forms as: “…a single sixth form on two sites” (AB, executive head, interview 2). As mentioned above, various byproducts or secondary consequences were sought after. The sixth form was seen by the executive headteacher and ‘senior governors’ as a vehicle for the wider alignment of the two schools, to create one school on two sites. The choice of post-16 education as such a vehicle was a flawed one according to the director of sixth form. So, the vehicle for collaboration was flawed by a lack of levers for collaboration. The competitive levers were stronger than the cooperative ones. This is what Park et al. (2014) would call competition-dominant coopetition, a situation where competition is strong and cooperation is weak. Park argues that the levels and quality of coopetition-based innovation are reliant on a balance of the two forces of competition and collaboration. They are clear that competition is as much a force for positive innovation as cooperation. This view undermines the feelings of many involved in the leadership of the federation: that competition should be deleted from the system in Corton and that this would lead to positive outcomes for pupils. The nature of competition is that it is resource-based: those being competitive need the resources to be successful. These resources are not always financial. It is important to analyse the sorts of resources that Corton High used for this competition that so imbalanced the federation’s main vehicle for collaboration. Corton High is the smaller school, had a structural deficit (less income than outgoings) and weaker outcomes for pupils. However, the £500,000 reserves that Eric Fox had ensured were built up before joining the federation were not its only asset. This asset was controlled by a single governing body, and could have, at any time, been used to assist in the structural deficits of other schools in the federation. Additionally, the governors as the single controllers of the federation schools could have required Corton High at any point to go about a staffing restructure to fully address its structural deficit. As the chair of the governing body explains, due to the factions within the single governing body, this was not possible. This is the sort of tension that Tidstrom (2014) calls ‘power dependence’. Tidstrom exemplifies this as one orgnisation using power (in this case financial) to force another into a position where the latter is forced to act in ways not in their best interests. However, the case of Corton is subtly different and shows clearly the perils of factions forming in governing bodies and weak interessement (Callon 1986) in that the undiscussed reserves were met with inaction on the part of the governing board. What cannot be discussed is shown here to have quite dangerous consequences for the proper functioning of a federation.

The choice of the post-16 education as a vehicle for integration was flawed on two fronts: Corton High’s ability to withstand it using reserves; and a lack of ability to discuss this openly at a governing body level. The literature would also suggest that this sort of collaborative activity with the intention of deleting competition may well have been counter-productive had it been effective (Bengtsson and Kock 2014 p183).

Bengtsson and Kock (2014) pose five challenging questions for coopetition research, all of which are pertinent to the situation in Corton. Using the example of Corton, one can see clearly the impact of underlying systemic tensions (competition built into the system), personal and professional tensions (those brought to bear by individual actors in Corton schools), and the new educational landscape created by the federation. Bengtsson and Kock’s first question is about ***balance in coopetition***. They argue that explanations of the balance of competition and cooperation needed for success have not been established. While this study is not concerned with the levels of success of the federation, but with leaders’ perceptions and their impact, most of the interviewees in this study would argue that there was very little or no success in the case of the federation in Corton. However, this lack of success could, obliquely, lead us to a better understanding of what the main balancing factors are in a federation of schools – how competition and cooperation can be balanced to bring about success in a school federation or MAT. A collaboration of schools needs to have carefully balanced cooperation and competition to provide the impetus for innovation, change and development. The mantra of deleting the long-borne competitive and antagonistic relationship between the two schools could be argued to have limited its success. Figure 5.4 shows some examples of the specific factors which participants suggested created the lack of success in the Corton collaboration around Raza-Ullah’s et al. concept of the balance being likened to yin/yang.



Figure 5.4: Factors affecting the balance between the internal and external boundaries in the collaboration.

Bengtsson and Kock’s second question asks ***how the tension created by coopetition is felt by those within the organisation***, whether balanced or imbalanced (ibid p184). According to Bengtsson and Koch, this is an under-researched area. My study outlines the way in which the tension is felt. The tension is *felt* in the frustration of actors as they try to balance their roles horizontally and vertically (as described above), in turbulent circumstances, as external factors (again, as described above and shown in figure 5.4) and the internal factors collide. As the actors act within the network they have to balance the personal and professional, maintaining their personal fiscal stability, negotiating huge professional decisions such as early retirement and the imposed professional consequences of restructure and redundancy. This tension is what led to the oft-mentioned “blood on the carpet”, the remnants of the battles between leaders and governors. The eventual outcome of the federation was described variously as failure, frustration, professional disaster, career-ending and stress-inducing. Six of the interviewees left jobs they did not want to leave, three through forced redundancy, one through forced resignation, and two through a recognition that they could not carry on in their roles effectively as a result of the impact of the federation on their professional standing. The tension was experienced in a personal, fiscal and professional way. The third question asks ***how coopetition works from a multi-level perspective***. This study does not address this question because it was limited to senior levels of organisational leadership. Therefore, I do not address this here. Further research is needed in this area because little of the published research on school federations takes into consideration the voice of the pupil, parent, teacher or other levels of leadership influence in the school environment. The fourth question asks how ***coopetitive dynamics play out in personal interactions***. This is somewhat inter-related with the way in which imbalanced coopetition is felt by actors. Interviewees were clear about the impact of the coopetitive imbalance on their personal interactions. Working relationships were entirely fragmented along the lines of the factions within the governing body, for example. This dissonance caused a lack of action that in turn led to a lack of impact, according to interviewees. One consequence of the imbalance is what I call ‘post-traumatic realignment’. This is the phenomenon of leaders with a clear original moral purpose of doing positive things for their community (in the case of Corton, all of the leaders) beginning to realign themselves to places of professional and personal safety after particularly traumatic events in their working lives. Interviewees spoke animatedly about their sense of hope at the outset of the federation project. They had hoped that longstanding destructive competitiveness would be deleted, that long-term fissures in relationships would be halted, and that they would protect the town’s education from what they saw as commercial vultures circling as a result of risks such as Ofsted. As a result of the imbalance and a series of critical incidents (some of which are outlined in this thesis), actors, some of whom had worked hard to build new relationships across schools, ‘went home’ to the safe spaces of their original schools, where they seeded discontent during their debriefs with other leaders at these schools. Even when leaders back at the home school had had no contact with leaders in other schools, through the sharing of versions of these critical incidents, short-hand ways of understanding others’ motives resulted in new, damaging artefacts or quasi-objects which stymied future collaboration and cemented ongoing imbalance of collaboration and competition. As a result of some of the negative personal consequences of the imbalance, even those in the most senior of positions (executive headteacher, chair of governors, director of sixth form) also aligned themselves back with their original schools exacerbating the negative impact of the imbalance.

**The final question is w*hat impact all of this has on business models and strategy***. Bengtsson and Kock argue that none of these things has been fully described within coopetition literature, and they have certainly not yet been analysed with regard to school federations. I would argue that the unique circumstances of schools, having a currently immovable competitive systemic political and business architecture, warrant a nuanced description that is somewhat different from other businesses. This is addressed in the conclusion chapter of the thesis.

**5.17 Conclusion**

Chapter 2 proposed that school collaborations, in their various forms, have increased in their proliferation over the past decade. This discussion of the findings, in the light of the critical lenses in particular, shows how a newly developing collaboration can fail to develop in the way in which interviewees expected or hoped for. Therefore, developing our understanding of how collaboration develops and fails to yield the results that participants want is key to the future development of collaborations such as MATs.

**Chapter 6: Conclusion, recommendations and implications for professional practice**

**6.1 Introduction**

*This final chapter begins by drawing together the conclusions I drew from the data. I then outline clearly the contribution this thesis makes to knowledge and make recommendations. I acknowledge the limitations of the study and the implications for future research before closing with detail on implications for professional practice and reflections on my doctoral journey.*

It is not within the scope of this thesis to attempt to measure the success of the federation. However, it is notable that all of the interviewees commented that the federation, and later the MAT, failed to meet its core aim of improving education. This thesis identifies a range of mechanisms through which this happened through the lenses of actor–network theory and coopetition.

What is, perhaps, surprising is that the deficits of the federation, as presented by the interviewees, are simple, common ones seen in many failing individual schools and businesses. A lack of vision clarity, weak role clarity, and fragmented governance led to what one participant called: “absolutely no benefit whatsoever over three years and hundreds of thousands of pounds”. What is interesting to the sector is the reasons that individual, ostensibly good hitherto schools could fall victim to such failure when collaborative working begins. The interplay between this and the new landscape of UK schooling is important knowledge as the primary school sector begins to academise and collaborate apace and many of the smaller MATs struggle with similar issues. This lack of strength in basic leadership areas seems not to have been a product of ineptitude but as a result of the novel circumstances that leaders found themselves in.

As Corton High and Miller Hall entered their new federation relationship in 2012, they had a history behind them. This history was already being used by actors to understand each other through a set of organisational attributes, often fuelled through narratives (such as the critical incidents) and artefacts. These understandings formed the foundation for the opening of the relationship. All schools coming together in close geographical locations are likely to have historical narratives and artefacts. It is this starting point that seems to have doomed the federation to fail to meet its stated aims. According to new leaders in the federation, similar issues of mistrust still remain, though to a slightly lesser extent. The weak relationships were perpetuated by a lack of openness about a range of issues at the very level of leadership that should have had the whole federation’s success at heart, not that of individual schools. These histories, or narratives, shared in leaders’ home schools as protective mechanisms, appear to have stymied any drive towards success for this federation. This lack of openness is a key function of the collaboration. These negative elements of the relationship came to the fore at times of stress. It was at these times that critical incidents tended to happen, and leaders used old narratives to understand these new ones. Thus, the original attempted takeover in the 1980s is used to understand the conflicts of the present even when none of the original actors was involved. These narratives become newly pernicious when they are used to understand the present.

The control of artefacts, or control of the way in which they were understood, was key. In essence, the strategic directors (governors and executive) were not in control of these artefacts’ meaning and or of the developing narratives. This was as a result of their attempt for Miller Hall *not* to be seen to take over and the imbalance of power at levels lower than the executive. An amalgamation at governance level did not bring the schools together because factions remained. Additionally, the stated aims of the federation were not shared by the governors, who continued to meet as unofficial ‘senior’ governors and factious groups. Governance became inert. Where lower levels of staff in the hierarchy collaborated, this worked well –because their careers don’t depend on that collaboration working. When their role became a part of the federation, once inducted into the narratives mentioned above by another actor, conflict ensued. In this uncertainty, a clear hierarchy of control seems to be important. Being substantive as a leader is key. As this thesis has shown, the legal uncertainty when a headteacher is or is not substantive is unhelpful to levering change.

In terms of strategic planning, iterative planning causes a hiatus. Having many formal and informal levels of decision limits the speed of change. When levering change becomes too hard, irritated leaders in the federation did lots of small things that increased complexity and blurred strategic vision. Over the course of the collaboration, leaders’ professional needs to be valued and to add value were not met. This led to unhelpful behaviours as outlined earlier. Additionally, when the vehicles chosen for cooperation (in the case of Corton, the post-16 provision) are the wrong ones, little progress can be made. It is not fair to say that interviewees had been inactive, but their high levels of activity were ill aligned to the whole federation’s, and later the MAT’s, core objective of improving education in the town. Deleting competition when schools collaborate seems to be futile not merely because it seems to limit innovation but also because when the underlying architecture is competitive, the tension is too great.

All of the participants were keen to point out that their colleagues, with whom they were in perpetual conflict for years, were, in fact, principled and capable professionals. In many cases, interviewees suggested that they would have acted in the same destructive ways were they in the same situations. This raises serious questions about the potential for the changes in education, across the system, to cause such negative behaviours to be drawn out of otherwise moral and professional colleagues. The networks that punctuate a federation are often closed to those them. Many federations and MATs have no deep knowledge, understanding or control of these external networks such as Ofsted, the DfE or RSCs. This is not the case for all leaders in federations. Some are in informal or formal networks that provide knowledge of the strong links between networks and stability. However, most do not. It is this high level of uncertainty that seems to instigate destructive leadership behaviours.

**6.2 Contribution to knowledge**

This thesis aimed to answer the following research question:

How do school leaders perceive the challenges of school-to-school collaboration and what does this tell us about:

* How the network of actors in school-to-school collaboration might be described and understood, and
* how coopetitive tension manifests itself in school-to-school collaboration, and
* the perceived impact on leaders’ actions in school-to-school collaboration.

The thesis answers this research question fully.

***School leaders’ perceptions of the challenges and their actions***

In the identification of the key themes (see figure 3.6) through a visual-participatory methodology (see 3.7), I have clearly captured leaders’ perceptions of the challenges presented by collaborative activity. I have presented a new and thorough typology of these challenges and shown how sabotage, hostility and resistance manifest themselves in newly formed networks of schools to make an original contribution to knowledge in this area. I have shown how a lack of professional capacity, emotional reactions, ego and status undermines the vision of collaborations, and how the external macro networks impact on the local and micro. I have also shown, uniquely in terms of the literature around school collaboration, how leaders are bruised and scarred by their experiences. Through interviews and, to a lesser extent, through documentary analysis, I have given deep detail to these themes in ways that have not been published before – through the voices of participants and their personal stories. Through the creation of critical incidents and the ‘history’ of the relationship, I have shown how these perceptions have come about from past incidents and shown how school collaboration can be understood through coopetition as a relatively new concept – something that has not been done before with the level of detail in this thesis.

***Coopetitive tension***

Partly as a result of the youthfulness of coopetition as a concept and a phenomenon, work to account for tension in coopetitive relationships is in its infancy. Bengtsson and Kock (2014) have drawn up a relatively one-dimensional typography of the sorts of tension in coopetitive business relationships. This thesis makes an original contribution by fleshing out their simple model, which references roles, knowledge, power and opportunism as the sites of conflict, with a much more detailed and field-specific typology. While the literature around coopetition has explored the nature of critical incidents in businesses, this thesis makes an original contribution in presenting coopetitive critical incidents in the field of education.

***Describing the network***

This ethno-case study is set in the context of the wider network. As such, I have produced a unique window into the relatively new and increasingly prolific phenomenon of formal, structured school-to-school collaboration in England. I have identified key actors in the network and explained their role in the context of the ethno-case study. This has not been done before in a systematic and detailed way.

***A space for honesty***

I was extremely fortunate that a group of school leaders were willing to speak with me about their experiences. It is likely that school leaders all over England are currently facing similar crises as new collaborative arrangements are put in place with ever-greater prevalence. At this time, the voices of school leaders are of vital importance to understanding the professional and personal impact of changing school structures. There are few spaces in which leaders can be open and honest about their experiences and it would likely improve policy-making to this space to be opened up further. This thesis contributes a level of honesty rarely heard and begs the question: how can more space for honesty be opened up, both within school-to-school collaborations, between actors in the network, and between school leaders and policy-makers?

**6.3 Recommendations**

Proposing high-level recommendations from this thesis is relatively straightforward. Proposing ways in which these recommendations might be realised is a somewhat more complex task. In response to many of the previously mentioned issues such a ‘lack of a shared vision’, one could simply make the recommendation that vision is clarified. However, this misses the point that the lack of a clear vision is an effect of the newly developing network’s negativity, not the deeper problem at play. For clarity, each recommendation is laid out below in short and numbered. I then propose ways in which each of these recommendations might be realised.

**A huge amount of new knowledge is needed** about school collaborations that leaders can use to work constructively in the new landscape. Within the current system, there are limited, trusted, understandable and accessible sources of knowledge about school networks which reference in detail the external networks which punctualise school networks. On the one hand, we simply lack the depth of knowledge about collaboration’s impact on schools within the new landscape (there is plenty on non-MAT school-to-school collaboration). On the other hand, there is a wealth of knowledge available to school leaders which speaks to the situation of English schools currently. Much of this knowledge is in the form of academic research, and much of it relates to the world of business, far less to the social sectors. This would, however, only be a starting point and to bring this research to bear on the education sector would require a reconfiguration of the role of school leaders as researchers, sifters of existing knowledge – something that leaders do not necessarily have the time or skill to do. School leaders also need to be involved in creating this knowledge. It seems clear to me that the voices of school leaders have been almost absent from much of the research on federations and MATs. This has caused the current, limited research to skew its focus to the structural side of novel school organisations, away from the socio-cultural outcomes of the reconfigurations in the school sector.

**When schools come together** to collaborate whether as a federation or a MAT or in any other model**, leaders need to have a deep understanding of one another and their respective organisational histories and developing narratives.** They need to understand which narratives are currently used for the organisations to understand one another. They need to work carefully on reframing these narratives to fit the new collaboration in ways which avoid actors’ use of the narratives to negative ends. The ability to understand existing narratives and to subsequently reframe them to create positive outcomes for schools is a specific and nuanced one. It would appear that, especially in federations and MATs where the schools have former knowledge of one another, this is a key skill. To do this, leaders need to have a particular epistemological view: do they believe that narratives happen because of events or that narratives are created by humans within networks? Do leaders feel empowered to create new narratives, or to at least challenge the relevance of the narratives of the past? Leaders of newly emerging collaborations need to plan to create new narratives through deliberate, constructive collaborations. The vehicles for collaboration need to be chosen carefully to protect newly forming narratives and post-traumatic realignment.

Leaders need to **think carefully about competition** between schools. Its existence at some levels is essential and at others is destructive. A mission to generally delete competition is futile and can have negative consequences. This is not only because balanced competition and collaboration is a healthy state of affairs but also because the underlying architecture of the school system is competitive. Leaders need to carefully identify where the competition lies within their system and analyse how it is realised and felt by different actors within the network. Once leaders have a fuller understanding of this, they need to harness these behaviours to create innovation.

It is essential for the developing network to create a **clear independence between individual schools and those who lead them.** If headteachers of individual schools are a part of the team that leads the wider collaborative organisation, they need shared purpose and to work clearly for the wider organisation, not their individual schools. This is, perhaps, counter-intuitive and asks that individual leaders distance themselves from their own schools. This would require a re-conception of the role of a headteacher within a federation or MAT. Essentially, individual school leaders need to ‘sign up’ to all of the pupils in the wider federation, not merely their own. Protectionist and isolationist attitudes produce negative behaviours and if a group of headteachers see themselves as the guardians of all of the education they are less likely to engage in sabotage and subterfuge.

The **networks that punctualise** the newly forming school networks **need to be ‘opened up’** so that school-level actants understand them and can play a part in the wider network using valid and accurate knowledge, not assumed knowledge. This is particularly the case for Ofsted, the DfE and the RSCs. As opposed to being impacted on by these networks, all school collaborations need to work with these organisations as part of the wider educational network. A relatively small group of school leaders, federation and MAT executives have a clear understanding of the inner working of these external but related networks. Some are on steering groups, work within large cities, and have personal networks, meaning that they have the agency to find out about a range of these networks’ operations. This benefit needs to be shared by all who lead schools. All should be entitled to have open relationships with those who lead these external networks, to benefit from the same knowledge and to seek clarity about their work and its impact on individual schools and families of schools. The mystique of these organisations should be removed and decision-making opened up beyond the regional headteacher reference groups, for example. Currently, the democratisation of information about these networks in the school space is unofficially and tacitly stymied by the high levels of competition between trusts and federations. As education becomes more marketised and mass-academisation takes hold, those in powerful positions within these external networks should understand that a natural response to this by individual CEOs is to hoard knowledge, protect networks that benefit one organisation over another and build capital of all kinds. If we are to have a truly fair system of improving education nationwide, the small players need to be let in. I fear that this will be a similar battle to that unfinished one of closing the gap between the rich and the poor: try as we might, the gap seems to be widening.

**6.4 Limitations of the study**

Clearly, this study was limited to one case study and one family of schools. As such, it does not have the sort of breadth one might find in a study of multiple families of schools, even though it gives a deep insight into the case-study schools. In addition, as a result of the scope of the study (being a doctoral thesis with only myself doing fieldwork), the depth to which I was able to capture actors’ perceptions was limited to senior leaders in schools and those responsible for governance. As such, these two limitations, of breadth and depth, as a result of maintaining the project at a manageable size were its key limitations.

Another key limitation was that the research question could not stray into an evaluation of the actual impact, especially on pupils, of the new collaborative relationship in Corton. This was, again, related to the manageable size and scope of the doctoral thesis but I would also argue that the education sector lacks valid metrics with which to judge the impact of school structure on pupils’ outcomes.

These are unavoidable products of the limited scope of doctoral study. Nevertheless, these limitations should be borne in mind when exploring the findings within.

**6.5 Implications for future research**

As is mentioned throughout this thesis, the pace of change in schools in England has been intense. There is an increasing amount of academic literature on the matter of school collaboration, specifically within the context of academisation, although still too little because of the newness of the phenomenon. What is clear is that the academies movement is about to take another turn: that of amalgamations of chains of schools and more prevalent academisation in the primary sector, the majority of which are not yet academised. What is missing from the literature is consideration of the voice of the pupil, parent, teacher, or other levels of leadership influence in the school environment, in the context of school collaboration. Future research should look to capture the experiences of these groups, especially given that the voice of the pupil, parents and teachers are notably absent from the literature. This thesis seeks to add the voices of leaders into the discussion: it is just a start. In this thesis, I identify how tension created by coopetition is felt by those within the organisation, which, according to Bengtsson and Koch, is an under-researched area. Again, this thesis is just a start, and is only based on a single case study. To create a typology of responses of governors, for example to newly formed collaborations, would be a worthwhile activity. And, to repeat, to show how the tension created by new collaborative enterprises is felt by the pupil, parent and teacher would be to break new ground. Additionally, somewhat missing from the literature, and from the national discussion around academisation and collaboration between schools is a space for honesty (see 6.2). There are few opportunities for school and academy leaders (outside of those school leaders who have direct links with policy-makers) to communicate with other elements of the network and share their pertinent, and often personal, stories. This means that neither the leaders nor policy-makers benefit from openness and honesty about the impact of systemic changes on them, their staff, schools and communities. Divergent views are rarely heard because the main fora for communication with policy-makers are focus groups. Within these focus groups, sharing divergent views or personal experiences is high-risk, professionally. Further research around how divergent and personal professional views could be sought, synthesised and used to strengthen policy decision-making would be most valuable.

As mentioned in chapters 4 and 5, the impact of the inspectorate, specifically in the context of school collaborations, structures of chains of schools and MATs, is not yet well understood. This also warrants further study.

**6.6 Implications for professional practice and reflections on my doctoral journey**

During the final writing of this thesis, as outlined above, I was appointed as one of Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) with Ofsted, a national policy lead, a special advisor and then as a senior HMI – all civil service positions. The completion of my EdD was instrumental in my being appointed, as Ofsted embarked on a journey of organisational change. With the appointment of a new Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector (HMCI) in 2016 came a drive for Ofsted to take a far more evidence-based approach than in the past. This, accompanied with the fundamental shift to a more fully academised school system and the proliferation of MATs, has led to my involvement in a range of professional activities both directly and indirectly related to my EdD.

As a result of the research skills I have developed through the EdD, I secured internal appointments to the MAT review panel and the MAT research group. These are explained in detail below. I was also appointed as the national lead on a major research project on behaviour. As the national lead on this project, I worked with a team of professional researchers to design a research project from the ‘ground up’, led a team of 9 field researchers in number of months of field work to explore pupils’ behaviour in UK schools and co-led the team writing a research report for national publication. This research has fed directly into national policy on how Ofsted evaluates pupils’ behaviour on inspection in the education inspection framework 2019.

In terms of the direct impact of my research, I was appointed to the research team looking at the impact of MATs on educational standards. This involved field research with MATs; my knowledge of how MATs evolve and operate was instrumental in my contribution to this project. My research experience with headteachers, CEOs, executive headteachers and governors has furnished me with a strong skillset to form research questions and research design for this role.

I also contributed to Ofsted’s reviews of MATs as a lead MAT inspector. Ofsted has recently begun to review MATs in what it calls ‘summary evaluations’. These reviews are Ofsted’s response to its view that MATs are now a core and expanding part of the educational landscape and require scrutiny on behalf of the public. Reviews involve the inspection of, or contact with, all of the schools in a MAT. They have no status in law (unlike inspections, hence the nomenclature) and have no published framework with any legal status. However, they assist MATs in their development, holding MAT leaders to account for their effectiveness. The Parliamentary Education Select Committee has publicly supported HMCI in her call for an official ‘framework’ for the inspection of MATs. Currently, the Department for Education has no plans to extend Ofsted’s remit in this area. While the DfE considers whether an inspection framework for MATs is necessary or desirable, Ofsted continues its summary evaluations. I have used the knowledge gained from my thesis research to help create the questions that Ofsted use nationally for these. I was also appointed to lead the West Midlands MAT review pilot. With the research and policy teams, I co-created three new models for MAT reviews and designed a pilot for the West Midlands region. This pilot was completed in July 2018. At the conclusion of the pilots, I was on the team that reviewed all of the evidence and developed Ofsted’s final approach to MAT summary evaluations nationally. Clearly, this EdD has contributed very strongly to my work in this area.

As Ofsted develops its organisational knowledge of, and systems to competently review, MATs, it has formed a group to lead on this work. I was a part of this group and brought valuable academic and practical insights to this work as a result of the EdD as Ofsted continued to consider how to better structure MAT reviews as time went on.

In a more oblique way, undertaking the EdD had a fundamental impact on my work as an HMI. As a result of my EdD work, I am able to quickly and accurately evaluate a wide range of information and form evidence-based conclusions that withstand high levels of scrutiny from colleagues, independent investigators and government. Within a few months of becoming an HMI, I began to specialise in complex inspections across all sectors of education. My ability to design research, collect data and weigh the relevance of evidence is, in no small part, attributable to my work as a doctoral researcher.

My commitment to the power of academic research to challenge and equip professionals to consistently improve led me to initiate a monthly regional training session based on educational research. During this session, all HMI from across the West Midlands came together to look at education through a theoretical lens. The feedback from HMI was been excellent; they valued this fresh way of looking at their work. Sessions have included Gramsci and ‘hegemony’, the ‘growth mindset’, social justice, social mobility, and Bourdieu and ‘capital’.

One of the key current concerns of Ofsted, the DfE and government is that of off-rolling[[18]](#footnote-18), exclusion and absence. Of further concern is the prevalence of these negative factors on pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities or who are from a disadvantaged background. The EdD has furnished me with a detailed and nuanced understanding of the wider education system in the England including school leadership and accountability. I was able to demonstrate this deep understanding in an interview for a national lead role with Ofsted. I was successful in being appointed as Ofsted’s national lead for attendance, behaviour and alternative provision. This meant that I was able to have an impact on pupils’ education and welfare on a national scale.

In October 2018, I was appointed as national specialist advisor in inspection policy for Ofsted. In this role, I was responsible for writing and redrafting parts of the education inspection framework 2019, running the piloting programme and speaking to audiences across the country about Ofsted’s new framework. I was able to have a direct impact in terms of one of the recommendations of this thesis.

The fifth recommendation I make in the final part of this thesis calls for a democratisation of information so that the networks that punctualise the newly forming school networks are open equally to all school level actors. As a part of the public consultation on new Ofsted framework (EIF 2019) I secured funding for, designed and led a series of public engagements to explain the reforms and their impact on the sector. Central to this was the transparency of the new framework, the advanced publication of the handbooks so that school leaders could see how Ofsted would enact its policies and the sharing of ‘inside’ information with hundreds of school leaders. To increase this transparency, I drew together a panel of school leaders to comment on and co-create sections of the inspection framework as I wrote them. Working with the Children’s Commissioner and the DfE has given me further opportunity to develop this transparency for the sector.

It is no exaggeration to say that undertaking the EdD has fundamentally changed the way I think as a professional. It contributed strongly to my employability as an HMI and to my effectiveness as an inspector. I now use the knowledge and skills from my EdD to work nationally on policy in areas related to the topic of this thesis.

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**Appendices**

# Appendix 1: Approval from the Corton Federation for the research

|  |
| --- |
| XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX15th March 2014Dear XXXXXXXXX,Thank you for your support for my research to date. I am presently completing my application for ethical approval in respect of the final EdD Thesis and require written approval from you to use the XXXXXXX Federation as my main case study. This will involve interviews with key staff and stakeholders, alongside observation and documentary analysis.Please could you indicate your approval for this by signing the bottom of this letter at the declaration. Thank you in anticipation.Dan Owen As the official representative of the XXXXXXXXXXXXX, I approve Dan Owen using the Federation as the case study for his EdD Thesis.Signed: XXXXXXXXXX, Executive Principal |

**Appendix 2: Information Sheet for Participants**

|  |
| --- |
| Please build a model of the federation **as it is at this point**. You don’t need to build a physical representation, but a metaphorical one showing links, power, problems, barriers… Here is an example:  |



“What may look at first glance like a child’s model is actually one of three alternate designs for Canadian healthcare delivery model for the year 2030. 25 leading thinkers from across Canada worked for three days to design and build new models for health service delivery that would be robust and financially affordable into the future.” (https://www.ctlabs.ca/what-we-do/lego/)

**Appendix 3: Ethical approval**

*Research Degrees Sub Committee - Rapporteurs Proforma*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Name and Title of Rapporteur:****Professor Michelle Lowe** | **Faculty : BEL****e-mail: m.lowe@staffs.ac.uk** |
| **Research Degree: EdD** |
| **Title of Proposed Programme of Work:** |
| **Name of Applicant:****Dan Owen** | **Faculty: BEL****Principal Supervisor: Dr K Vigurs** |
| **Please complete the following:****Does the applicant demonstrate that he/she has the following:*** Relevant qualifications
* Higher Degree
* Undertaken Research Methods Training
* Require Research Methods Training
* Has the support of the Faculty
* Has the support of external sponsors or collaboration ( letter of support must be attached)
 | **The Applicant** |
| Yes | **No** | **Other( i.e Apl)** |
| **X** |  |  |
| **X** |  |  |
| **X** |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| **X** |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | Agree | Disagree | Other |
| **Does the application:*** Demonstrate that it aims to make a contribution towards knowledge
* Demonstrate that the research is original and/or at the leading edge of research?
* Outline its objective(s)
* Demonstrate its theoretical perspective(s)
* Appropriately outlines the Methodology to be used
 |  |  |  |
| X |  |  |
| X |  |  |
| X |  |  |
| X |  |  |
| X |  |  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Please Complete the following:* Does the proposed supervision team demonstrate previous or current supervision experience?
* Is the experience of the 'team' related to the proposed topic?
* Are you satisfied that any external supervisors nominated are suitably experienced?
* Are you satisfied that the external collaborations are appropriate?
* Does any member of the proposed team require supervision training as a condition of their appointment?
* Has a Risk Assessment been completed?
* Does the application require approval from an ethics committee? If yes, Please state which (i.e Faculty, university, external or professional body)

…………………………………………..* Is the Faculty required to provide additional resources?
* Are there any other issues about this application that need to be addressed?
 | **The Supervision Team** |
| Yes | No | Other |
| X |  |  |
| X |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| X |  |  |
| **Other** |
| **Yes** | **No** | **N/A** |
| X |  |  |
|  | X |  |
|  |
|  | X |  |
|  | X |  |
| Recommendation (please delete as appropriate):* Approve
* Minor amendments required (for Chair's approval) – please list below
* Minor amendments required (for Rapporteur(s) and Chair’s Approval) - please list below
* Revision and Re-Submission to RDSC – please list below

**Signature: Michelle Lowe Date: 27/8/14** |

Please list by bullet point below any amendments, corrections or clarification required and also add any comments you wish to make:

**Appendix 4: Consent Form**

**CONSENT FORM: Dan Owen, Doctorate in Education**

**Working Title**:

The Educational Landscape Post 2010: Leadership Challenges Emanating From the Drive to Collaborate in a Competitive Educational Marketplace

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Please tick box** |
| I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. |   |
| I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason. |  |
| I agree to take part in the above study. |   |
| I agree to the interview being audio and/or video recorded |  |
| I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in research publications  |  |

I understand that I can request the withdrawal of my data from

this study up until the analysis stage of the project.

All notes and digital recordings of interviews will be stored securely and will be anonomysed so that only the researcher knows the source. At the conclusion of the study all physical and digital records will be securely destroyed.

Name of Participant Date Signature

Name of Researcher Date Signature

**Explanatory Information Sheet**

**Information for Prospective Participants**

My name is Dan Owen, a doctoral student undertaking research in the field of school leadership.

**What am I researching?**

The research aims to look at the challenges school leaders face as result of changes to the education sector, especially those that came about post 2010.

To enable me to carry out this research I would like to interview a number of school leaders. There are three key research questions:

* How do school leaders perceive the challenges of school-to-school collaboration?
* What does this tell us about the development of inter-school relationships?
* To what actions and impact do these perceptions lead?

I would be very grateful if you could spare me some time to have a discussion with you.

**What is the nature of the research:**

I will be collecting data through semi-structured interviews which should take around half an hour each.

**How will I promote confidentiality and security of information?**

All information collected will treated confidentially, and the names of the contributors will not be disclosed. When the research is drawn together, no participants’ names will be used, pseudonyms will be used for any quotations used. I would like, with your permission, to make recordings of the interviews to facilitate the swiftness of the process. These recordings and all associated documentation will be securely encrypted, stored digitally, and destroyed at the close of the study.

**How might you benefit?**

Upon the completion of the final thesis, I will be happy to share a copy of the findings with yourself, other leaders in your school, your Local Authority and governors. If you would like me to do this, please forward the necessary contact details.

**Further Questions**

My supervisors are Dr Kim Slack and Dr Katy Vigurs at Staffordshire University. They can be contacted by emailing: k.vigurs@staffs.ac.uk

1. Regional schools commissioners (RSCs) were introduced in the summer of 2014 in response to the accelerating academisation of schools and the resultant need for there to be some form of oversight given LAs’ lack of remit to monitor academies. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Findings from River Primary and Greenfield Primary were not included in the thesis to control the volume of data. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Stability’ means the extent to which the pupil population stays the same except for those arriving at normal times (start of Year 9) and leaving at standard times (end of Year 11). Low stability would mean that pupils arrived and left at non-standard times. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The 14**–**19 curriculum reform instigated joint 14**–**19 working across the whole of the UK, with institutions specialising in certain pathways and each area offering the whole range of options, in different institutions. This had the potential to lead to increased pupil mobility, and a flow in and out of schools at age 14 and 16 to use facilities in other schools. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ‘Parents’ refers to parents and carers throughout. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Substantive headteacher: A person who is appointed to the post of headteacher pursuant to section 35 (3) or 36 (6) of the Education Act 2002, as opposed to a non-substantive headteacher, who is someone who fulfils some or all of the duty of a headteacher without being so appointed. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For each subject, there is a choice of examination board providers and courses are different in structure, meaning that if a student begins one course, it is difficult to transfer to another different provider. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. At this time, the funding formula for post-16 students changed. This had a major impact on the finances of schools with large sixth forms, those reliant on sixth form funding to operate or sixth forms which formed a large proportion of the whole school population. Miller Hall’s population of sixth formers was a large proportion of its total number and Corton High relied on post-16 funding to balance its books. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. All-through schools offer education to children aged from three to 18. This option would have resulted in Greenfield co-locating with Corton High, which had the capacity for this, and opening the school up to children from age three. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. National Leader of Education, a senior and experienced headteacher tasked with assisting other schools in difficulties. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A catchment is the accepted geographical boundaries of a school’s intake [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Senior leadership team [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Pseudonym. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ‘Get it’ – to understand the governors’ real role; to lead strategically. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. It was at this time that the LA changed its policy on redundancy payments so that schools bore much of the costs of redundancy instead of the LA. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This is a term that describes the time between the earliest and latest date that a school inspection could take place. This window is dictated by the Education Act and Ofsted’s publications. As mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, these windows were widened at certain points between 2012 and the present as Ofsted could not meet the entirety of its workload requirements. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Headline accountability measures are the main measures by which the Department for Education judge school effectiveness. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/category/off-rolling/ [↑](#footnote-ref-18)