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# **Special Educational Needs and Disability Provision within an English Multi-Academy Trust: Capturing the Vision of its Practitioners**

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9798 words

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# **Special Educational Needs and Disability Provision within an English Multi-Academy Trust: Capturing the Vision of its Practitioners**

## **Abstract**

The provision for special educational needs and disability (SEND) within academies and across multi-academy trusts is an under researched area. Drawing on data derived from one multi academy trust (MAT) located in central England, that consists of two primary and two secondary academies, this paper focusses on capturing the practitioners' 'vision' for SEND provision, and the barriers they face in its realisation. The desire for a 'holistic approach' to SEND, characterised the main ambitions for staff, with local issues associated with 'identification' and 'support and intervention', as well as wider concerns with dwindling autonomy over practice, seen as key barriers. We consider a range of avenues that educational establishments may take in their quest to embrace holistic practice, including the privileging of a multi-dimensional approach to inclusive education, and the need for clear and decisive leadership.

**Keywords:** Special Educational Needs and Disabilities; Academies; Multi-Academy Trusts; Leadership; Inclusion

## **Introduction**

With a dearth of research activity in academy schools in England (Salokangas and Chapman, 2014; Keddie, 2014), and specifically in relation to the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) of their pupils (Black, Bessudonov, Liu and Norwich, 2019), this article aims to satisfy the calls for greater clarity and insight into SEND provision across these establishments. The article draws on data from a study that aimed to capture the ‘vision’ of practitioners in a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) in relation to this provision, as well as the barriers they encounter in realising inclusive practice. In order to achieve the ‘vision’ of a more holistic approach to SEND, the individual academies experienced two main barriers: ‘identification’ and ‘support and intervention’. As a means of contextualising both the findings and the recommendations that stem from them, we begin this article by providing a brief overview of SEND legislation and provision in England and examine the recent ‘academisation’ of state-maintained schools. Details relating to the empirical study, including the academies where the research was conducted and the processes of data collection and analysis follows, and precedes the coverage of the main research findings which focus on the participants’ ‘vision’ for SEND provision and the barriers they encounter when attempting to realise this. Subsequently, the findings are used to challenge the belief that academies are currently enjoying greater freedoms, before suggestions are made that may allow MATs to establish holistic approaches to SEND provision.

## **SEND Legislation and Provision in England**

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the foundations of special education were captured across a range of Acts of Parliament, including the Mental Deficiency Act (1913) and the Education Act (1921), which framed legislation for education as a vehicle to categorise pupils based on

‘difference’, and authorised schools to diagnose children as ‘deficient’ (Wearmouth, Gosling, Beams and Davydaitis, 2018). The Education Act of 1944 further reified this conceptualisation of children with SEND as ‘uneducable’, ‘maladjusted’ or ‘educationally sub-normal’ and in need of ‘special educational treatment’ in separate schools. A shift away from this deficit approach was presented in the influential Warnock Report of special educational provision of 1978, where the new concept of ‘special educational needs’ superseded the language of old of ‘disability of body or mind’ (Wearmouth, et al, 2018, p. 17). Both the Warnock Report (1978) and Education Act (1981) helped to reconfigure approaches to SEND in schools, through the introduction of ‘statements’, and integrative and inclusive approaches, based on educational goals for children regardless of ability or disabilities. Chief amongst the Warnock Report’s recommendations was specialist provision for children with SEND. Consequently, the Education Act (1981) called for all Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to identify and assess pupils who may require special educational needs, and to provide suitable provision for them.

The requirement for LEAs and schools to make 'reasonable provisions' for children’s SEND, so that they are afforded the same opportunities as those who were not disabled, has been re-affirmed in policy over the years (see Education Act 1993; 1996; Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001). The Equality Act (2010), and its definition of disability as ‘a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' (more than minor or trivial) and 'long-term' (a year or more) negative effect on (one’s) ability to do normal daily activities’ provided further guidance for schools, by clarifying the need to acknowledge sensory impairments as disabilities of equal status to others such as epilepsy and diabetes. Sitting alongside the Equality Act (2010) is the Children and Families Act (2014), which ‘introduced important changes for all teachers about the education and inclusion of pupils with SEND’, (Briggs, 2016, p.1). Section 19 of the act sets out some key principles that LEAs must consider when supporting children with SEND,

including their participation in decision making; providing detailed information to facilitate the likelihood of this; and full consideration of the views, wishes and feelings of the pupils and their parents. Stemming from the Children and Families Act (2014) was the SEND Code of Practice (2014), and this statutory guidance for organisations that work with, and support children and young people with SEND is further detailed next.

### **Policy into Practice**

First published in 2014 and updated in January 2015, the ‘SEND Code of Practice (COP): 0-25 years’, clarifies the responsibilities of health organisations, LEAs and a range of educational establishments, including early education settings, schools and academies, to those with SEND, in accordance with the Children and Families Act (2014). In addition to the requirements set out in this act, the code identifies that LEAs should co-ordinate a ‘local offer’ of SEND services in the area, and be the key source of information and support for the statutory assessment process. Furthermore, Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans are to replace statements, and those with an EHC plan are entitled to request a personal budget as part of their support. Differentiated teaching for children with SEND is advocated, as is the performance management and continued professional development and training of all staff, as a means to improve pupil outcomes. In keeping with this emphasis on ‘outcomes’, the code also provides information for both mainstream and specialist providers to facilitate the likelihood that they improve attainment for all children. Additionally, details regarding the four over-arching areas of SEN: Communication and interaction difficulties; Cognition and learning needs; Social, emotional and mental health difficulties; Sensory and/or physical needs, are also included, (DfE, 2014). The COP was deemed a ‘major reform programme’ that aimed to position ‘children with special educational needs and disabilities as the same as...all children

and young people' (DfE, 2015, p.11). Practice was reformed by placing the pupils and their families, rather than professionals, at the centre of the SEND process, although doubts have been raised regarding the successful implementation of the code into practice (see Hellowell, 2018),

Further guidance for schools has been developed and distributed more recently, including the SEND reflection framework (London Leadership Strategy, 2017) and in keeping with the code, clear responsibility for provision and inclusive practice is placed on teaching staff as 'teachers are responsible and accountable for the progress and development of the pupils in their class, including where pupils access support from teaching assistants or specialist staff' (DfE, 2015, p. 99). With the class teacher now 'the lynchpin of special educational provision' (Briggs, 2016, p. 15) in terms of its enactment, management and evaluation, and noting the common pressures associated with the role, including the ever changing curriculum (Forrester and Garrat, 2016), the rise of performativity (Webb, 2006) and increased regulation of practice (Perryman, Maguire, Braun and Ball, 2017), many doubt the likelihood of successful outcomes for both practitioner and pupil (Burton and Goodman, 2011; Parsons and Platt, 2017). Furthermore, as teachers are now expected to undertake a greater number of tasks in a shorter period of time (Galton and Macbeath, 2008) and with autonomy over their roles and duties ever dwindling (Alexander, 2015), the calls made in the COP for teachers to be the focal point of SEND provision and inclusive practice does require attention on a practical level, hence the development of this project. Although the 'terrors of performativity' (Ball, 2010, p. 215) and regular scrutiny and surveillance of practice have firmly permeated education, in recent years there has been an increase in the number of schools converting to academies, perhaps in the hope of reclaiming a scintilla of autonomy, and this shift in the educational landscape is explored next.

## **Academies and MATs**

Academies are independent schools, funded publically, and as is the case with state-maintained schools, they must follow the law and guidance on admissions, exclusions and SEND. The key difference, according to the DfE (2015), lays in the greater freedoms academies enjoy, such as being independent from LEA direction, control over not only the pay and conditions of their staff but also the right to employ those with no formally recognised qualifications to teach (DfE 2012), and autonomy over curriculum delivery. Furthermore, although academies and maintained schools obtain the same level of funding per pupil, the former receive theirs directly from the Education Funding Agency, not the LEAs, and ‘have greater control over how they use their budgets to benefit their students’ (DfE, 2015). Finally, whilst the principles of governance are identical across the two provisions, the governing bodies within academies also enjoy greater autonomy. In 2018, 35%, or 7,472 of the 21,538 state-funded schools in England were academies and of these, 6,996 had converted from maintained schools (NAO, 2018). Indeed, ‘the government hopes and expects that all schools will want to become academies if they are not already’ (DfE, 2016, p.8).

The move towards ‘academisation’ (Forrester and Garrat, 2016) and certainly the celebration of neo-liberal principles such as marketisation, freedom of choice and minimum state intervention, all seen as central to the Academies programme, have been espoused by a range of British governments over the years. Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Government’s Education Reform Act (1988) epitomised this neo-liberal stance, as did the introduction of Grant-Maintained schools, which allowed existing primary and secondary schools to opt out of LEA control, and to receive funding direct from central government. The introduction of the



City Academies Programme in 2000, under the New Labour government of 1997 to 2010, was another example of diversifying educational provision in Britain that focussed on ‘extending selection, reducing the role of LEAs and promoting privatisation’ (Gillard, 2008, p. 12). The causes of the expansion of academisation in England in recent years are many, but chief amongst these is the Academies Act of 2010, which allowed all publically funded primary and secondary schools in England to become academies, (Forester and Garret, 2016), under the guise of the further freedoms and enhanced levels of autonomy clarified above.

The fetishisation of autonomy as an aspect of school effectiveness that brings about improved educational performance has been widely cited in government sources (see DfE 2010; 2012; 2016). Although the evidence base for these claims have been challenged (see Coffield 2012; You and Morris, 2016), international PISA data (OECD 2010), and examples taken from countries including the USA, Canada and Sweden, make the case for the benefits of autonomy for schools and the professionals within them (DfE, 2010), and illustrate the potential of academies as a model for school improvement. When schools convert as standalone academies – also known as a single academy trusts - the extent to which they have complete autonomy over the curriculum and the practices of staff across the school and within the classroom has been theorised (see Frostenson, 2015). At present, however, 97% of schools converting to become academies join MATs (DfE, 2016), as they choose to work formally in collaboration with other academies. Praised for identifying and deploying the best leaders, teachers and support staff, from across the component academies, ‘to ensure that as many children as possible benefit from their skills and expertise’ (DfE, 2016, p. 5), in May 2017, 18% of primary schools and 36% of secondary schools in England were in a MAT, (DfE, 2017).

Although both academisation, as well as the number of schools joining MATs is at an all-time high in England, little independent research has examined the experiences of the teachers within them and even less regarding SEND provision. First-hand research in academies is scarce prior to 2010 and whilst studies have taken place in secondary academies since (see Keddie, 2014), there is limited research that captures the views of staff within primary academies (Salokangas and Chapman, 2014). Furthermore, whilst it has been argued that MATs are well positioned to take established 'leadership responsibility for a subject team or initiative or through coaching and mentoring making sure that teachers and leaders who need to improve quickly are supported to do so.' (DfE, 2016, p. 5), there is a dearth of studies across multi-sites, like MATs, more widely (Hollins and Guzman, 2005), meaning calls for further research based on these gaps in the literature have been made (see Salokangas and Chapman, 2014; Keddie, 2014).

### **Research Rationale**

In recognition of such calls, this article captures the barriers experienced by staff within a MAT in achieving a robust SEND provision, that is consistent with their 'vision'. As has been alluded to, little is known concerning SEND provision within academies due to the shortage of research in these establishments. By capturing how staff members, within component academies of a MAT, understand SEND provision, the barriers associated in achieving this, as well as determining their ambitions and proposed strategies to establish inclusive practice, this article contributes to the calls voiced above. In the next section we detail the research process from which the basis of this article is grounded.

## **The Empirical Study**

The empirical study was designed to allow for insight into both the rhetoric and reality of inclusive SEND practice across a MAT and, in doing so, contribute to our understanding of the interpretation and utilisation of SEND provision in academies. The overall aim of the study was ‘to explore the vision of practitioners in a Multi-Academy Trust in relation to SEND provision’. As a means of achieving this aim the following research questions were developed: What is the range of work carried out in relation to SEND issues within and across academies in the MAT? How effective are both the individual academies and the organisation as a whole in meeting the requirements of children identified as having a Special Educational Need and/or Disability? What is the overall vision for SEND practice in the organisation? To what extent is this shared by practitioners throughout the academies within the MAT? Details pertaining to the specific MAT and the individual academies within it are detailed next.

### **Central Multi-Academy Trust**

Data were retrieved from a MAT, located in central England, consisting of two primary and two secondary academies. Formed in 2015, in the remainder of this paper the Trust will be referred to as ‘Central MAT’. The research team, and authors of this paper, consisted of a university lecturer and the Strategic Lead for SEND within Central MAT. Although sampling decisions were informed by the aims of the project and the desire to explore SEND provision within a MAT, convenience sampling was performed (Kemper, Stringfield and Teddlie, 2003). That said, the sampling process garnered a range of case study academies that varied with regards to size, number of pupils on roll, social class (categorised by pupil premium percentage), proportion of children identified as having a SEND, and Ofsted judgement of

overall effectiveness. A brief description of the four academies that form the MAT is offered below:

*Riverside* Judged to be ‘good’ by Ofsted in 2016, this is a smaller than average primary academy (230 pupils on roll). It has a high proportion of pupils (20%) who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, which is above the national average (14%), although the percentage of pupils with a statement of special educational needs or an EHC plan is in line with the national average of 11%. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for pupil premium funding is well above the national average and two-fifths of the pupils in the academy are eligible for free school meals.

*Rosewood* This is a larger than average primary academy with over 500 pupils on roll and is located in an urban area with high levels of social and economic disadvantage. The number of pupils supported by pupil premium funding is much higher than the national average. The proportion of pupils identified as having a special educational needs is slightly above the national average and in the latest Ofsted report in 2015, the academy’s overall effectiveness was judged to be ‘good’.

*Hilltop* This secondary academy has over 1100 pupils on roll and at the latest Ofsted inspection in 2017 was rated as ‘good’ for its overall effectiveness. The proportion of pupils with a SEND is well above average, as is the number of students known to be eligible for the pupil premium.

*Northgrove* Northgrove is a smaller than averaged size secondary academy with just over 700 pupils on roll. Of these pupils, the percentage who are disadvantaged and supported by the pupil premium is below the national average. The proportion of pupils with a SEND is also below the national average. In 2016, Ofsted judged that the academy ‘requires improvement’ in terms of its overall effectiveness.

The findings reported in this paper have been extracted from an analysis of the disparities and similarities in SEND provision between academies, and within Central MAT as a whole. Although data will be presented by theme, the findings draw on instances of SEND provision and inclusive practice across the individual academies and the wider MAT.

## **Collecting Data**

To help comprehend the study’s research questions a two stage empirical investigation was designed and, throughout, the study adhered to the ethical procedures and protocols outlined by the British Educational Research Association (2018). Although the two stages of empirical investigation will be discussed separately and are presented as though the process of data collection was linear, it should be noted that an iterative and inductive approach to both data collection and analysis was utilised.

### *Stage 1: Document Analysis*

The Strategic Lead for SEND within Central MAT conducted reviews of SEND provision in each of the four case study academies, and these documents provided data for this stage of the

research. On all occasions, the reviews adhered to the directions and protocols outlined in the SEND reflection framework developed by the London Leadership Strategy (2017) for the UK Department for Education. Whilst it is intended that this toolkit is used flexibly, those tasked with the responsibility of performing the reviews are encouraged to focus their attention on six elements of SEND provision. As such, SEND provision is judged on the staff members' knowledge of: the learner; the quality of teaching and learning; the learning environment; support in transition and change; the various systems and processes; and working and communicating with families, (London Leadership Strategy, 2017). Ultimately, the purpose of the review is to identify the range of work carried out in relation to SEND provision and judging its effectiveness, with the overall aim of improving strategies across the MAT to facilitate pupil outcomes. To allow the construction of each review, data were gathered by Central MAT's Strategic Lead for SEND via a variety of means, including both unstructured and structured observations, informal conversations with pupils, and structured interviews, both individual and group, with a range of staff members. Each review was structured around Teaching and Learning; Pupil voice; Teaching staff; Support staff; Pupil engagement in learning, and for each of these five areas of interest, the academy's strengths as well as areas for consideration were identified.

*Stage 2: Focus Groups*      Focus groups were preferred at this stage to not only help determine the 'vision' for SEND provision amongst key members of Central MAT's leadership team, but to also explore some of the data captured during the analysis of documents in stage one. Subsequently, the design of the focus group interview schedule was influenced by the document analysis, specifically in relation to the barriers and challenges faced by academies within the MAT, that were seen to hinder the realisation of inclusive practice. Additionally, the

focus groups were also employed as an exploratory tool to engage staff members in discussion with regards to the study's research aims and questions. As a result, we endeavoured to capture the vision for SEND provision, how it is currently being enacted across the four academies as well as an appraisal of the practices across the MAT. Consequently, the focus group used questions such as: 'What are your aims and ambitions for SEND and inclusive practice within the academy where you work and the MAT more widely?', as a means of establishing the 'vision' of the participants. On all occasions, the focus groups were conducted by the university lecturer, whose only contact with the interviewees, prior to the research, was in the focus group sampling process. During this time, the researcher liaised with one of the focus group members, Gill, who was Assistant Chief Executive Officer of Central MAT. It should be acknowledged, that the experiences of interacting with Gill, and the researcher's observations of the practices that took place within the academies, may have shaped the research findings, as the researcher and the research process should be seen as objectively separate. Consequently, and in keeping with the stance that an 'objective researcher' cannot exist, the findings that are presented later are our own 'vision of reality' (Richardson 1992).

Considering the document analysis focused mainly on the individual academy's differing practices and, in line with Miles and Huberman's (1994) view that 'evidential data' should guide sampling strategies, it was decided that the focus group members would consist of key members of Central MAT leadership teams with specific responsibility for SEND provision. Consequently, sampling for the stage two focus groups was non-random and purposive in nature. Using the process of inductive reasoning (see Denzin 1970), we chose strategic cases that we felt would best yield a depth of information in relation to the findings made during the analysis of documents as well as the study's overall aims and questions (Maxwell 1997). In

total, there were three focus group interviews comprising of 9 staff members sampled from Central MAT leadership team. One focus group consisted of the following three members of the Trust's senior leadership team: James (Chief Executive Officer); Gill (Assistant Chief Executive Officer); Jackie (Chief Financial Officer). The second focus group was utilised to collect data from the following senior leaders of the individual academies: Boris (Headteacher at Northgrove); Angie (Senior Executive leader for the secondary Academies); Frank (Principal at Hilltop). The third focus group consisted of Jane (Deputy headteacher at Rosewood); Tallulah (SENCO at Riverside) and David (Learning Support Manager at Hilltop), all of whom had specific responsibility for SEND provision within both their individual academies and the MAT more widely.

### **Analysing the Data**

The focus group interviews were transcribed and all of the data gathered across both stages was organised using Atlas ti software. Utilising conventional thematic analysis advocated in qualitative research by authors such as Cresswell (2005), we embarked upon a cross-case exploration of all the data, as well as within and between academies analyses. In order to allow to move beyond 'surface accounts' (Yates 1999), we used a mixture of 'top-down deductive and bottom-up inductive processes' (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2010, p. 17), meaning the iterative approach adopted during the research allowed the data analysis process to be both exploratory and confirmatory. When creating 'themes', Boyatzis (1998) reminds us that 'keeping the objective or research phenomenon in focus is essential' (p. 48). In recognition of such advice, all of the themes reported in the next section were generated were in response to original research aims and questions. The combination of research methods and data sources acted as a resource from which we were able to validate the findings. Additionally, each of the themes



were subjected to a process of ‘re-analysis’ where we remained ‘blind’ (Boyatzis 1998), and where the qualitative data analysis process outlined above was repeated. As a product of these efforts, the findings reported next have been cross checked and validated with evidence from each stage of the research, and have been subjected to a re-analysis.

### **Findings: Identifying the barriers and capturing the vision**

Across the documentation and within the various focus groups the data revealed two main barriers that hindered the realisation of successful provision. In response, and again consistent across the data sets, the hopes and ambitions, expressed in a ‘vision’ for SEND provision, were captured, as were some of the avenues in which this could be realised. Consequently, in this section, we explore how both the ‘identification’ and ‘support and intervention’ of children with SEND impeded the enactment of inclusive practice across the MAT, before clarifying how the role of ‘leadership’ was deemed as central in the realisation of a holistic approach.

Staff members across the focus groups drew from their individual ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti, 2005), and thus emphasised specific aspects of SEND provision that related explicitly to their roles. Tallulah, a SENCO, argued her role in SEND provision was to “help those struggling to access a normal school life”, whilst deputy head teacher, Jane, felt she needed to “ensure that every child is included in..school and that we get the best out of everyone”. Commonality prevailed amongst the focus group participants also, in that all, to differing degrees, stressed that a tailored approach to SEND provision should ensue, as James states:

James (CEO)

*SEND provision is not about equality, it's about equity. It's not about all students receiving the same input, It's about allowing students to access the support that they need to access, to allow them to fulfill their potential, and for each student that could be different.*

One other important theme for the focus group participants related to the “removal of barriers” so that the children’s potential could be fulfilled. Boris, the Headteacher at Northgrove, maintained that “ultimately, SEND provision is all about the removal of barriers, so that all children can not only access education but can also feel stretched and challenged”, whilst Jackie, the Trust’s Chief Financial Officer, argued “it’s about the removal of barriers for children with SEND, and giving opportunities that are specific and personalised to suit their needs”. Although the ‘barriers’ in these instances refer, in the main, to the personal needs of the children, they also prevailed in the systems and processes that operated within the academies and across the MAT, and it is to two of these ‘barriers’ that we now turn.

### *Identification*

Ensuring that the systems and processes associated with the effective identification of learners with SEND are consistently applied across each academy was deemed as key to ensuring equitable provision across Central MAT. Data gathered from the individual reviews of SEND provision revealed inconsistency in the identification processes across the MAT as a whole. Although ‘a range of diagnostic assessments are available to support accurate screening for SEND across all academies within the Central MAT’ (Hilltop SEND review), the

“identification of SEND children across the Trust is an issue. Some schools do it well, others don’t, just yet” (Gill - Assistant CEO).

Individual staff, such as Tallulah, pointed to “the endless streams of documentation and bureaucracy” in keeping with the “requirements of the SEND code of practice” that positions “each class teacher as their own SEND manager”, as contributory factors that deter the identification process. That said, the differing processes between academies within the Trust were seen as being particularly problematic. The contrast in capability in identification was most prominently revealed when comparing the two secondary academies: Hilltop and Northgrove, as Angie, the Senior Executive Leader for the secondary academies reveals:

Angie (Senior Executive Leader) *At Hilltop, the staff and the SENCO are excellent at identifying SEND children and accessing the resources they deserve. If there is a reason that a child isn’t accessing school and lessons, they are on top of it straight away; they’re good at identifying that and putting a plan in place to help integrate the children, but Northgrove isn’t there with that just yet. Northgrove have a number of students on the SEND register that don’t attract any funding, but that is down to the systems and processes of identification there.*

Consequently, across the individual reviews there were calls for greater involvement of ‘the Strategic Leader for SEND regarding identification’ to ensure both parity and the facilitation of a ‘trust-wide provision’ (Northgrove SEND review). It should be noted that across the data sets there was evidence of such whole-trust, holistic practices, most notably in the “pooling of resources” (James – CEO) and for some, this “sharing of good practice and expertise across Central MAT” (Angie) was particularly valued, as is captured below:

Boris (Headteacher)

*One of the key benefits of being in the Trust is the strategic response under the SEND umbrella. It raises more awareness and allows for greater dialogue, which helps us, in individual academies, to identify pockets of help and support. So, the team delivering SEND support at Hilltop have been working here to help us to develop our offer, and that sharing of practice and ideas is helping this academy get better with SEND provision.*

Although organisational cultures, such as those of the Central MAT, ‘are not best understood as unitary wholes’ (Alvesson, 2002, p. 190), the assimilation practices highlighted above were valued by staff within the individual academies, showcasing a holistic approach to SEND provision. The Trust provided further support and guidance for individual academies in relation to the teaching and intervention strategies for SEND children, and this is detailed next.

### *Support and Intervention*

The reviews of SEND provision allowed for a broad understanding of both the strengths and areas for further improvement of support and intervention strategies within the MAT as a whole, and in doing so revealed variance in the quality of offer within individual settings. At Rosewood, ‘staff are deployed effectively to support SEND pupils’ and the ‘quality of support and intervention is good’ (Rosegrove SEND review). Likewise, at Riverside, SEND ‘pupils were confident that they were supported well’ and ‘staff were overwhelmingly positive about the quality of provision for SEND pupils’ (Riverside SEND review). Tallulah, the SENCO at Riverside, clarified this academy’s support and intervention strategies in saying “we do a lot of intervention, a lot of one to one support for our SEND children...each class has a teaching assistant for part of the day to conduct tailored SEND support, and to facilitate the teacher regarding differentiation in the classroom”.

As was the case with the processes of identification, variance across academies was also captured in the intervention strategies designed to support children with SEND. Again, Hilltop academy was positioned, in both the documentation and within the views of focus group participants, as being particularly strong in this aspect of the provision. With “45 EHC plans in place” and “15 learning support assistant specifically for children with these plans” (David – Learning Support manager), Hilltop presented a rigorous approach to intervention where ‘SEND students are particular complimentary about the support that they receive’ (Hilltop SEND review). David, the academy’s Learning Support Manager, stressed the importance of “quality first teaching and intervention” and the strategy of “equipping teaching and support staff with skills required to both understand the differing needs in their classrooms and then to be able to differentiate in response to this appropriately”.

Elsewhere within the Trust, there was the view that ‘SEND pupils were not always appropriately catered for’ (Riverside SEND review) and that the “intervention and support was not what it could and should be” (Angie). Echoing the issues of identification, and the approaches to overcoming these captured above, individual academies “amended and adapted the support they offered and sought more and more advice from the expertise within the Trust” (Boris). Jackie, a member of the senior leadership team, stressed the importance of the Trust as a resource for the individual academies in stating, “one of our schools is quite new to the Trust, and I’d say they’re in the process of developing their SEND provision and specifically how they identify and then support those children and families”. Furthermore, she stressed the central role of the leadership teams in the facilitation of holistic approaches to SEND provision in arguing, “I think as a senior leadership team that it’s important that we lead and offer direction in this area. All our schools need that guidance and they need to know that we’re here to support them”. In the next section we explore this view further, clarifying how ‘leadership’ was perceived as being central to the realisation of a trust wide, holistic vision.

### *Leadership*

Whilst the SEND Code of Practice (2014) maintains that every teacher is a teacher of SEND, it is less explicit about the role of leadership in the facilitation of the provision. Data derived from the SEND reviews of practice revealed the need for ‘clear direction and accountability for the outcomes of the learners with SEND being rooted in the leadership structures’ (Northgrove SEND review). Within the individual academies, the work of the specific senior leadership teams in encouraging inclusive practices was often valued by staff. At Hilltop, for example, there is a “senior leadership team that values SEND provision, even though they may

have priorities in other areas” (David), whilst Tallulah was “immensely proud of Riverside’s reputation of taking SEND children in, that other schools won’t” and that such decisions and directives “come from the top, from the leadership of the school”. Although there were calls for ‘one policy to be completed that covers all SEND students within the Trust’ (Northgrove SEND review), guidance and direction of SEND provision were also prioritised amongst the MAT leadership team, as is captured in the following extract:

Gill (Assistant CEO)

*We ask a lot of questions of staff regarding SEND and we expect a certain standard, but we also listen to some quite ‘crunchy’ conversations and feedback, and we act on that. We need to have that ear to the ground to identify what is emerging at every level, so we can support the academies to achieve their and our vision.*

The conflation of ideals of the individual academies with those of the MAT, captured in the use of the term ‘vision’, was justified by some focus group participants as “the leaders responsible for the Trust...come from the individual academies, where there are cultures of inclusion” and where they know that SEND provision is always “on the agenda” (David). That said, there was the view that the ‘vision’ needed to be better disseminated to all staff across the academies, as “one thing that isn’t done so well is that all staff within each academy and the MAT more widely are often unaware of the vision and aims for SEND and inclusive practice” (Jane). The reference to ‘vision’ was particularly popular in both data sets, and we aim to capture this in the next section.

### *Capturing the vision*

The 'vision' for SEND provision and practice focused on moving towards a consistent, "whole trust approach" (Boris; Jackie; Angie). As has been alluded to above, staff members frequently spoke about a disparity of provision across academies within the MAT, with Hilltop academy in particular being viewed as a "beacon of good practice" (Frank – Headteacher). David, the school's Learning Support Manager, maintained that "it takes a long time to get an ethos in place, which absolutely prioritises SEND provision" but his "school has got this" as "teaching staff value the support staff and everyone else play a part in delivering the SEND offer". Frank, Hilltop's headteacher, felt his "school has an excellent SEND provision, including a range of staff with specific specialisms", yet elsewhere within the Trust there was concern regarding a dearth of expertise within individual academies. Boris, the headteacher at Northgrove, sought "a specialist in dyslexia, a specialist in dyspraxia, and a specialist in speech and language", whilst Angie, the Trust's executive leader for secondary academies made calls for "more staff across the academies, with expertise in specific special educational needs so that all of the needs of all the children in the trust are met"

The various reviews of SEND practice also prioritised equity across the individual academies in making recommendations such as all academies should 'use the same referral form' and 'implement a Trust wide review process' (Northgrove SEND review). Consequently, the desire for "similar approaches" (Jane) or a "more uniform stance" (Tallulah) to SEND provision fed into the vision. David re-affirmed this stance in arguing that "SEND is not just one person's responsibility, but everyone's, right across the schools and the MAT more widely" and wanted to move towards a whole-trust, holistic approach where "staff across the academies are always



on the same page” and where “collaboration and collegiality guides the ethos”. The Trust’s CEO echoed the sentiments expressed by David in positioning a whole-trust ethos as central to his vision for SEND provision, as is captured below:

James (CEO)

*When you operate at a school level it’s based on people; but at Trust level is based on ethos. What I hope the Trust allows is for institutional memory, practice and culture that one school in isolation would find it difficult to have for a very long time. So, the Trust is a legally binding partnership that puts in the procedures for SEND provision that should endure in the long term, and in time, this will help to solve the issues experienced by individual schools.*

Individual academies and the wider MAT cited a range of concerns and pressures that have thwarted the realisation of this vision. Chief amongst such concerns was a perceived “reduction in funding” (Jane) and “under resourcing” (Boris) which has “hit the Trust hard” (James), and obstructed the likelihood of all four academies achieving strong SEND provision. Furthermore, there remained a “lack of true ownership regarding curriculum, and how this can be tailored and shaped for SEND children” (David) and due to pressures regarding “Ofsted and accountability” (Frank) and “the need to illustrate strong pupil outcomes” (James), some felt “they had their hands tied, as there was only so much (they) could do” (Gill). Consequently, some of the freedoms celebrated as being unique to the academies programme (see, DfE, 2016) were not widely experienced by staff across Central MAT. In the following sections we explore

some of the implications of the study's findings, specifically in relation to competing notions of autonomy, and consider potential avenues and hindrances in achieving a whole-trust approach to SEND provision.

## **Discussion**

### *Dwindling autonomy - A re-occurring barrier?*

Whilst referred to in various guises, staff members within this study identified 'dwindling autonomy' as a key variable that deterred the facilitation of successful SEND provision across the Trust. Issues with curriculum, surveillance and performativity, cited by the likes of David, Frank and James, captured a compliance with accountability measures frequently experienced by staff within state maintained schools, (Day and Smethem, 2009). For Frostenson (2005) such compliance demonstrates a loss in 'general professional autonomy', which focusses on 'the mandate to organise the framing of teachers' work' with regards to 'legislation, ...curricula, procedures and ideologies of control' (p.22). Although academies are seen as the epitome of the 'trend' towards greater school autonomy (Glatter, 2012; Boyask, 2018), Gill's claim that the MAT more widely "had their hands tied", captures how staff within these establishments continue to feel restricted by central government control and influence. That said, Frostenson's (2005) model may also provide an avenue for school staff to re-consider their agency in exercising the freedoms that allows for the expression of vision and imagination in practice, as two other forms of professional autonomy: 'individual' and 'collegial', that focus more on 'professional practice', have been forwarded.

Individual professional autonomy relates fundamentally to the individual's opportunity to influence practice through the shaping of pedagogy, space, teaching materials and the evaluation systems in place. Although 'complete freedom' (Jarkestig Berggren, 2011), should not be implied, central to individual autonomy is agency over action and decision-making relating to the professional practice of the individual teacher (Frostenson, 2005). Whilst we cannot dismiss the influence of policy and accountability measures on teachers' ability to exercise individual professional autonomy, as the existence of evaluations and controls will inevitably confine practice, the key in achieving individual autonomy lies not with the fact that such measures but with 'who' controls these processes, (Frostenson, 2005). In this sense, the infringement of individual autonomy need not occur as 'some schools still allow for considerable autonomy with regard to teaching practice' if such approaches 'emanate from local school management.' (Frostenson, 2005, p. 25). School and academy senior leadership teams have been seen as central in restricting teachers' autonomy (Berry, 2012), acting as a 'conductor rod' in conveying government policies, expectations and demands within their establishments (Forrester, 2000). Consequently, there has been calls for 'more confident and courageous' (Parker, 2005, p. 25) school leaders who embrace local freedoms as, by doing so, greater levels of individual professional autonomy may be achieved, (MacBeath, 2012).

Where teachers' collectively are free to 'influence and decide on practice at local level', collegial professional autonomy is said to exist (Frostenson, 2005, p. 23). In order to facilitate such collegiality, managerial autonomy should be widely exercised by school management due to their 'decisive influence' (Lundahl, 2005) at local level. In the case of Central MAT, the senior leadership team are well positioned to 'influence meaning making and the formation of ideas and values' (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008, p. 39) in the organisation, and consequently have the capacity to prioritise collegiality as a central element of their 'vision'

for SEND provision. The existence of ‘collegial professional autonomy’ within establishments does not equate to staff doing ‘whatever he or she likes’ as all are accountable to ‘decisions concerning contents and forms of work that are reached jointly’ (Frostenson, 2005, p. 24). Although ‘collegial autonomy’ is highly influenced by school management, staff in this study widely advocated “collaboration and collegiality” (David) as the central aspect of the ‘vision’ and called for stronger leadership in its realisation. In order to achieve such a stance, and to help in the formation of a holistic approach to SEND provision, staff members across the Trust, including its senior leadership team, should be aware of a range of issues they may face, some of which are discussed next.

#### *Achieving a ‘holistic’ approach to SEND provision*

The concept of ‘whole-school approaches’ has become increasingly popular in recent years with the rhetoric being applied to a variety of education based activities including pastoral support (McGuinness, 1989), mental health (Weare, 2000) social and emotional learning (Banerjee, 2010) and care (Warin, 2017). Whilst the range of interested researchers in the field offer a plethora of differing definitions, all emphasise the importance of ‘holistic’ thinking, that prioritises structures and procedures that focus on the operation of the school as a whole. Furthermore, another mainstay of such thought concerns the need for strong and clear leadership, if holistic approaches are to be nurtured and sustained. Senior leaders, however, should acknowledge that total congruence often does, and cannot, exist within schools, let alone across MATs, nor is absolute uniformity a precursor for success. As Alvesson and Sveningsson (2008, pp. 38-39) suggest ‘people hardly interpret everything in organisations similarly’ due to the disparities across ‘work tasks, divisions, departments and hierarchical levels that....foster differences in terms of meanings, values and symbols.’

Consequently, instead of seeking a single, universal approach across Trusts, senior leaders may find it beneficial to frame SEND provision by the individual academy's unique needs and cultures, and in response to the pupils, parents and communities each serve. In order to facilitate the move towards holistic approaches there needs to be greater acknowledgement of inclusive education as a product of multiple processes and values, as by situating SEND as a multiple oriented matter, rather than a single dominated issue (Mitchell, 2005b), schools and their staff are well positioned to adapt provision for their individual pupils, creating an inclusive stance based on 'need'. By embracing this multi-dimensional approach (Haug, 2016), the emphasis on an individualised SEND provision for children within the component academies, that is shaped by their specific needs and requirements, will allow for a truly inclusive approach where all pupils are catered for equitably across Trusts.

In attempting to realise holism within educational establishments, senior leaders should also note the differing 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez et al. 2005) that influence staff interpretations and enactments of policies, procedures and practices, such as SEND provision. Indeed, these 'funds' were especially important for the range of staff members within this study, in that they located their views of the provision in response to their specific roles within the academies. Research has illustrated how certain individuals within schools, such as senior leaders and teachers, are positioned as 'subject matter experts' (Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt, 2000), whilst those with non-teaching roles are widely viewed as 'educarers' (Osgood, 2005), and as such, certain positions and views are legitimised whilst others are silenced. As Smith (2000) reminds us that schools often reproduce inequality at multiple levels, as some staff 'learn that their own voices have authority that they count and should be heard'

whilst ‘others learn they lack’ (p. 1149), in order to foster the principle of holism, all staff within schools and academies need to know that they have agency.

Whilst calls for enhanced equality between the staff groups regarding training opportunities have been widely reported (Reay 2001; Osgood 2005), disparity between school staff members in relation to the training they receive is common. Research over the years has consistently identified how training is a commodity enjoyed by the select few in schools, with non-teaching staff regularly being overlooked (see Clayton, 1993; Moran and Abbott, 2002; Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin, Russell and Webster, 2007). As it is necessary for schools to recognise the importance for continual professional development of staff if SEND provision is to be effective (DfE, 2014; 2015), it is recommended that schools and academies invest in consistent training opportunities for all. Again, central to the realisation of such ambitions is visible, clear and active leadership. Indeed, as has been argued here and elsewhere (see Warin, 2017), the ability to achieve a holistic approach within educational organisations is couched in strong leadership, and their ability to ‘inspire’ a shared ethos, to ‘value’ and facilitate provision, but to also ‘recognise’ that the realisation of any ‘vision’ can only occur through a concerted and planned course of action.

### **Concluding remarks**

Although the research, from which the basis of this article was derived, was successful in providing answers to the research questions, it is important to acknowledge that the study only accessed the views of a small number of participants, across one Trust. Bearing in mind the points explored within the article, that practices and provision are often influenced greatly by the unique needs and cultures of establishments, it is hoped that future researchers interested

in this field embrace the views of many practitioners across a range of MATs in their work. This limitation, however, should not detract from the contributions this article makes, in terms of our knowledge of both SEND provision across academies, and the associated practices within MATs more widely. The research has illustrated how staff across academies continue to experience the same pressures and threats to their autonomy that are widely reported elsewhere within the compulsory education sector. These, in addition to more local barriers, were seen as the major hindrances for successful SEND provision within the varying establishments. Furthermore, whilst senior leaders within MATs may hold differing positions and titles to those within state-maintained schools, their central roles in facilitating the likelihood of a strong ethos across their respective organisations remains. Varying definitions of the term ‘whole-school approach’, it seems, have created an area of research that is both multifaceted and complex, and one that warrants further attention. Establishing a whole-school approach, based on uniformity, does not happen by chance, nor should it be held up as the epitome of ‘holism’. In the case reported here, one academy, Hilltop, was set apart as a ‘beacon of good practice’ due in part to its staff capacity and expertise, efficient methods of both identifying and supporting children with SEND, ability to seemingly balance the pressures of both the standards and inclusion agendas as well as a capacity to achieve consistency across their provision. Yet, data also pointed to a lack of coherence and co-ordination both within academies and across the MAT more widely, and whilst at first glance such discrepancies may seem contradictory to ‘holism’, it has been argued that rigidity and over prescription deter the likelihood of a ‘whole school universal approach’ (Banerjee 2010). Whilst consistency was seen as important for some staff within this study, we suggest, as a means of achieving a more holistic approach, that greater attention is given to engaging all staff across academies and MATs so that there is an integrated approach to SEND. Furthermore, and as alluded to throughout, a clear leadership structure responsible for the delegation of SEND responsibilities

to all staff is also needed. These suggestions, in turn, may allow for the realization of 'holistic' approaches within MATS, that not only embrace congruence, but also respect the individuality of the academies and the staff working within them.

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