

Researching Local Learning Systems during a period of Fragmentation and Reformation

Toby Greany
19th Jan 2022

A decade ago, [Stephen Ball](#) described England's school system as “messy, patchy and diverse”, reflecting the roll back of Local Authorities (LAs) and the rapid increase in independent academies underway at that time. Since then we have seen a shift in policy, away from promoting single academies and towards Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), which now oversee more than a third of all schools in the country. This has led to the emergence of what [Megan Crawford](#) and her colleagues describe as a “multi-dimensional middle”, with multiple MATs, a reduced LA and various other hubs, networks, providers and bodies all operating alongside each other to support and oversee schools and academies. Inevitably, there is significant variation between how this plays out in different areas, leading some to characterize the system as [fragmented and incoherent](#). The government's new White Paper, [expected sometime this spring](#), will reinvigorate the push towards a fully MAT-run system, with every school located in a ‘strong’ trust, operating within – it is hoped – a more aligned and coherent system.

Rob Higham and I studied these developments in our [research](#) into the ‘self-improving, school-led system’, published in 2018. A key finding was how the fragmented nature of the system had created multiple, increasingly marketised models for knowledge exchange. For example, we visited three ‘outstanding’ primary schools in one locality. All three were members of the same local partnership, but they took quite different approaches to how they accessed and shared knowledge and expertise, reflecting the different values and dispositions of the schools’ senior leaders:

- The first worked to *protect* its knowledge, by organizing almost all its Continuous Professional Development and Learning (CPDL) internally, and only buying in consultant support or collaborating with other schools in specific areas. This collaboration rarely involved the school's teachers, given a concern they might be poached.
- The second school worked to *sell*, particularly its expertise around leadership and achieving an ‘outstanding’ Ofsted inspection, and sought to make ‘serious money’ from doing so.
- The third school worked to *jointly develop* and share knowledge. It attached high priority to collaboration and was committed to the progress of partners, but faced clear tensions in how to fund its approach given its reluctance to run neatly packaged courses.

These three schools arguably represent – in microcosm – the challenges we face across the wider school system. The fragmented nature of the system presents a clear risk that knowledge, expertise and innovation could get ‘locked up’ within particular schools, MATs and networks. The result could be that local CPDL provision becomes too variable in terms of quality, equity of access, and impact – creating a system of ‘winners and losers’. This would clearly be in contrast with all that is known about improvement and professional learning in the highest performing school systems globally, which have [coherent and well-embedded frameworks](#) for developing and sharing evidence-informed knowledge and expertise.

Since our research was published, in 2018, the government has worked to establish more coherent national frameworks for teacher and leadership development, for example through the Early Career Framework and revised National Professional Qualifications. The delivery of these frameworks is also being coordinated more tightly at national and local levels, with 750 separate Teaching School Alliances replaced by 87 Teaching School Hubs.

These recent developments can be seen as part of a process of 'reformation', as the government seeks to reimpose a level of order on the fragmented system. The forthcoming White Paper and the further development of a MAT-led system represents the next step in this process, although there will no doubt be fierce debates around whether the government's ambition is either desirable or realistic.

For now, let's focus solely on the question of whether the new model has the potential to enable knowledge and expertise to be generated and shared in systematic ways, so that all schools and teachers can benefit. At one level, it seems plausible that a MAT-led system could integrate with the new place-based Teaching School Hubs – and our initial research project interviews across three localities do provide some examples of this happening. However, we have also heard about challenges and barriers, some of which appear to reflect local historic relationships and competitive cultures, while others are more systemic. What seems clear is that MAT leaders must focus, first and foremost, on developing their CPDL internally, across the schools they are directly accountable for. As yet, there is limited evidence on whether all MATs will then be willing or able to collaborate and share with other MATs, across local schooling systems.

For all these reasons, understanding how England's systemic process of fragmentation and re-formation is impacting on CPDL for schools and teachers across local areas is a pressing concern. The EQualLS research project aims to contribute to this priority by studying the development of Local Learning Systems (LLS). Since autumn 2021 our team has begun researching three case studies of LLSs across different parts of England, with a focus on CPDL in primary mathematics. In our infographic we set out what we see as the main elements of an LLS, based on our interpretation of the organisational and system learning literatures.

In future blog posts we will explore these literatures in more depth and we will continue to share our emerging thinking and findings via fortnightly blogs as we progress through the project. The final research report is due for publication in December this year. Please do leave a comment and stay in touch.

Local Learning Landscape

Drawing on several different literatures, we developed six features of a local learning landscape. These features were used as a framework for our research and to structure the findings in the published report.



Local Lens

The research focuses on specific geographic localities – City, Town and Shire – but recognises that these do not have any intrinsic coherence unless the professionals who work there choose to imbue it.



Many Linked Systems

Each local landscape is composed of multiple organisations and networks – such as schools, MATs, the Maths Hub and so on – which might link together more or less tightly and in more or less formal ways.



Professional Learning

Individuals engage in formal and informal learning, both within their schools and through local and non-local networks as well as via formal courses and provision.



Practices, Tools and Routines

Where professionals share practices (including theories and language), tools and routines, this can facilitate individual and collective learning.



Bridging Boundaries

Some individuals operate beyond their immediate organisation or context, helping to move knowledge and expertise around the locality.



Sense Making

Relevant leaders come together periodically to identify and tackle shared issues, taking time to explore underlying causes and to shape collaborative action.

Levelling up: so what for ‘local’ school systems in England ?

Toby Greany & Thomas Cowhitt
2nd Feb 2022

The government has launched its [Levelling Up White Paper](#), with every part of England able to get ‘London style’ powers and a mayor ‘if they wish.’ The proposals include plans for 55 new [‘Educational Investment Areas’](#) which have been identified based on an [analysis](#) of pupil outcomes in local authority districts.

The assumption behind Levelling Up seems to be that place – or ‘the local’ – still matters, even in a globalized world. However, we argue here that the idea of ‘the local’ is changing in England’s school system and that this has significant implications for any attempt to revitalize improvement efforts and enhance pupil outcomes, in particular for the most disadvantaged.

This is the second blog post from our EQualLS research project which is seeking to understand the nature and development of local learning systems (LLSs), with a focus on continuous professional development and learning (CPDL) in primary mathematics. We have initially conceptualised a LLS as having eight main features, shown in this [infographic](#). Our [first post](#) argued that England’s school system has been going through a process of fragmentation and reformation.

Over the past few months, we have conducted interviews with system leaders working across three local areas in England. In a broad sense, a system leader in education is someone that has authority or influence over multiple schools. We have started by interviewing system leaders because we think they can provide a helicopter perspective of each local system. We have interviewed leaders in Maths Hubs, CEOs of multi-academy trusts (MATs), Ofsted Regional Directors, regional leads at the Department for Education, directors of Research Schools, Local Authority (LA) representatives, Teaching School Hub leads, maths entrepreneurs in edu-businesses, and chairs of Primary Headteacher Associations. In the next stage of the research, we will visit a representative sample of schools in each locality and speak with classroom teachers, maths subject leads, and headteachers.

During our conversations with system leaders, the concept of place and the relevance of geographic boundaries has been a constant theme. There is widespread acknowledgment that – historically – geography has been a central if under-recognised feature of the system, reflecting the time when all schools were maintained by the LA. But there is a sense that local identities and ways of working have become more complex and multi-dimensional, as once strong roles and relationships between the LA, DfE, and school leaders have been fragmented. MATs are not bound by geographic boundaries and many trusts straddle multiple LA areas. Many of the other new players in the system – Maths Hubs, Research Schools, Teaching School Hubs and so on – do have a specified geographic footprint, but their remits are not organised along traditional LA boundary lines. Many LAs are also being reshaped – as combined authorities – or are sharing their roles with the new elected mayors and equivalent devolved arrangements, a process that the Levelling Up White Paper promises to expand.

Meanwhile, of course, schools and teachers can and do collaborate and undertake CPDL in a much wider range of ways, including online and via social media. Most commercial CPDL providers are not based in a given locality. Schools and teachers engage with networks and organisations that might be local, regional, or national, such as Challenge Partners and the Chartered College of Teaching.

Unsurprisingly, given these unfolding changes, there was little consensus among the system leaders we interviewed regarding the continued relevance of geography to CPDL and the school systems they lead across.

System leaders provided various examples of how local geographic boundaries remain relevant in understanding England's education system. For example, the DfE has relied on LA district boundaries to identify its Educational Investment Areas and to distribute funding to Opportunity Areas. Equally, in those areas where academisation has been slower, LAs have retained elements of their previous role, particularly in rural areas where MATs have been slower to take on large numbers of small primaries. Even in areas with high levels of academisation, our interviews with LA leaders suggest that they continue to play a role in shaping local provision.

At the same time, what is clear from our interviews is that 'the local' is becoming less clear cut and, arguably, less relevant as ever more schools become academised. For example, MAT CEOs explained that they want their staff to identify as a member of their trust first and foremost, presumably making local identities and allegiances less significant in the process. The relationship between national and local priorities is also shifting. Teaching School Hubs, for example, are responsible for delivering the national [Early Career Framework](#) and [National Professional Qualifications](#), replacing (or, in several cases, working with) the more numerous and local former Teaching School Alliances.

These initial conversations about place and the importance of 'the local' have brought up important questions that we will continue to explore as the research develops. What role might LAs or the new Levelling Up Mayors play in educational governance and provision as academisation continues? How does the Hub model for CPDL delivery, which relies on geographic boundaries, provide effective CPDL in this new environment? How do place-based hubs support CPDL in schools belonging to MATs operating across geographic boundaries? If traditional place-based identities and ways of working are becoming more multi-dimensional, what new boundaries might be forming and how might these facilitate or frustrate equal access to high-quality CPDL among practitioners working in different schools? What are the implications of all this for equity and quality, in particular in the most disadvantaged schools? These are the questions that provide direction as we shift our attention to individual schools in the second phase of our research.

Researching local learning systems: three methodological questions

By Toby Greany and Thomas Cowhitt
23rd Feb 2022

Schooling in England is complex and evolving. Our previous blog posts begin to explore some of this complexity. This post focuses on some of the issues we have wrestled with as we have sought to study 'Local Learning Systems' amidst all this change. How exactly does one learn about complex and rapidly evolving human systems? What tools might researchers, practitioners, and leaders in education employ to develop nuanced accounts of these dynamic systems?

Using primary mathematics as a case study, our research team is attempting to answer 'to what extent, and how, do Local Learning Systems (LLS) provide high quality, inclusive professional development and learning for schools?' Each of these concepts – local, learning, and systems – need to be problematized, and we intend to dedicate future blog posts to discussing these terms. However, driven by the requirements of real-world research funding and project timelines, we have had to get on and design our study. We outline here three strategic questions that we have discussed as we have done so and the associated research design decisions we have made, whilst acknowledging that in each area we have had to balance sophistication with pragmatism – and that our decisions could always be rightfully challenged!

Which 'bit' of the professional learning system should we focus on?

A starting point for the project was to recognize that Continuing Professional Development and Learning (CPDL) for teachers occurs through combinations of formal and informal learning, meaning that we are interested in the messy reality of how teachers learn in practice, not only in what happens on INSET days or externally run programs. Equally, we are interested in 'learning systems', which we interpret as requiring a focus on an area of practice that is sufficiently discrete and systematic to enable meaningful study and comparison across diverse contexts. Our choice was to focus on CPDL in primary mathematics, although we see this as offering a case study lens, rather than a singular focus. This decision reflected the fact that mathematics is a core curriculum subject, meaning that all primary teachers require career-long, mathematics-specific professional learning. In addition, mathematics was the first subject to establish a hub model for professional development, in 2014, with a network of Maths Hubs led by the National Centre for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics (NCETM) complementing a wider offer provided from a range of sources. We argue that these aspects make mathematics an ideal case for study, affording a well-embedded hub model nested within existing and new systemic structures and involving a range of national, regional, institutional, and individual actors who collectively shape LLSs.

What counts as 'local'?

Our second blogpost explored the relevance of the local, arguing that although the Department for Education continues to rely on local authority (LA) boundaries in many areas

of policy, and despite the government's wider 'levelling up' agenda, the geographic demarcation of place in education is becoming less clear cut as new regional, national, and non-place-based entities shape how and where teachers and schools engage in CPDL. While acknowledging these shifts and fully recognizing the wider ways in which technology and networks are opening up new possibilities for CPDL, we remain convinced that place will continue to be important in shaping professional learning for teachers and schools. But how should we define 'local' for the research, and how could we select a sample that is representative of England's diversity? We decided to focus on three diverse localities across England. One is within a city, another is a town, and the third – shire – includes a mix of rural villages and more densely populated centres. Each locality has around 60 primary schools in total, meaning that it is smaller than most LAs and much smaller than a Maths Hub region. We will visit six schools and academies in each locality, reflecting our view that accessing 10% of the total number of schools will allow us to develop a reasonably representative picture. Importantly, while Maths Hub and LA boundaries did factor into how we defined these localities, the research is not intended as an evaluation of Maths Hubs or a study of LA 'systems'.

Who can (best) help us to understand any particular 'local learning system'?

We have had various discussions regarding where knowledge about 'the local system' might be held. We knew that 'system leaders' – such as Maths Hub and Teaching School Hubs leads, LA leaders, Ofsted regional directors, Regional Schools Commissioners, and leaders of former teaching schools – could all offer valuable perspectives, as they would most likely be involved with system design and/or implementation. We have interviewed these types of system leaders across our three localities. However, we recognize that they can only provide one set of perspectives.

What about school leaders and subject leads within individual schools who are tasked with identifying CPDL opportunities, attending external training, and disseminating learning among school staff? What about the many classroom teachers who participate in school-led initiatives and who frequently seek out their own professional learning opportunities as well? How do these school practitioners make sense of a fragmented CPDL system? Ultimately, we have decided to interview four groups in each locality: system leaders, school leaders, subject leads, and classroom teachers. We hope this diversity will allow us to construct a nuanced picture of a system or collection of systems that

Looking Inside a Local Learning System: the unique role of boundary spanners

By Thomas Cowhitt and Georgina Hudson
16th Mar 2022

Our research team is engaging with three different Local Learning Systems (LLS) to better understand continuing professional development and learning (CPDL) provision in England. Each case study locality represents a unique context. We are working within one shire, consisting of small villages, several small towns, and the surrounding rural areas. We are also working within one larger town and one densely populated urban district. To gain an understanding of each LLS, our team is interviewing a range of individuals involved in the delivery of primary maths CPDL, including system leaders, school leaders, subject leads, and classroom teachers in each of our three localities.

However, some individuals have proven difficult to slot into one of our four professional categories. We refer to these actors as 'boundary spanners', as they simultaneously operate within or liaise between several organisations (they span across the organisational boundaries that most activity and individuals operate within). They work in both formal and informal capacities and are involved in a range of activities. These individuals are keenly aware of what is happening across the LLS. They also appear to be involved in capacity building for professional learning and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of CPDL.

For these boundary spanners, their ability to lead seems to go beyond the authority afforded by their formal titles. Their knowledge of the system is deep and there is an innate authenticity to their influence, as they have built significant professional capital through decades of working and interacting with practitioners across their local context.

In one instance, a boundary spanner we interviewed simultaneously held four different positions during their work week. On Monday they serve as a deputy headteacher. On Tuesday and Wednesday, they are a devoted classroom teacher. On Thursday they assume the responsibilities of a Specialist Leader of Education (SLE) across their Multi-Academy Trust. On Fridays they work for their regional Maths Hub, coordinating working groups with other local teachers. Of course, we are sure the divisions are not this neat in practice! But the ability to juggle these multiple roles, while bringing coherence to the larger system was immediately noticeable to our team.

Another boundary spanner we encountered had decades of experience serving in a number of different roles in education across a locality. Their career history seemed to touch on every relevant formal title related to professional learning in primary maths. They had served as a classroom teacher, maths subject lead, and SLE. They had previously led a teacher training program at a university, were a former director of a teaching school alliance, and are now leading a new Teaching School Hub. They have also been involved in senior leadership roles with their regional Maths Hub.

The way these individuals operate as boundary spanners within an LLS appears to be quite different from most formalised system leaders, such as National Leaders of Education. For these boundary spanners, their ability to lead seems to go beyond the authority afforded by

their formal titles. Their knowledge of the system is deep and there is an innate authenticity to their influence, as they have built significant professional capital through decades of working and interacting with practitioners across their local context.

On multiple occasions, these actors have self-identified as “wearing many hats” and recognise their professional roles are bespoke. Significantly, when we ask other interviewees to name influential individuals or organisations in primary maths CPDL provision, boundary spanners are listed early and often. This notoriety suggests their inter-organisational influence. It seems significant that these individuals tend to maintain significant professional contacts both within and outside their own individual schools or organisations. These individuals are key catalysts of knowledge exchange and collaborative partnerships, something which DfE prioritises as part of a larger vision for a ‘school-led’ education system.

Boundary spanners are of interest in many fields of research. Network researchers like [Burt](#) refer to these actors as filling structural holes between formal organizational boundaries. Boundary spanners can be the source of innovation if they take advantage of their positionality, synthesising information from many different sources that are otherwise disconnected. Public policy researchers such as [Paul Williams](#) and educational sociologists like [Stephen Ball](#) also discuss boundary spanners within the context of professional learning. A boundary spanner seems to be on the leading edge of information with current and grounded contextual knowledge of what is happening within their profession because they are interacting with many sources outside their own organisations.

In the coming months, our team is interested in learning more about these boundary spanners. How do individuals become boundary spanners? What happens if a boundary spanner leaves an LLS? How common are these type of multifaceted roles in the English education system? How might an LLS build capacity for boundary spanners and manage succession? What does the existence of boundary spanners tell us about LLSs?

The Changing Face(s) of Teacher Professional Learning in Primary Mathematics in England

By Catherine Gripton and Thomas Cowhitt
4th May 2022

This is our fifth blog post from the EQualLS project. In it we explore teacher professional learning in primary mathematics, how it has changed and is continuing to change as the school system is reformed in England. We consider the nature of professional learning in mathematics and what high quality might mean in this context.

All primary teachers require personalised, career-long, mathematics-specific professional learning which includes continual development of both their knowledge about mathematics and about how to teach mathematics ([ACME, 2016](#)). Effective professional development improves teaching and ultimately children's learning so is necessary in order to equip children with the mathematics they need to live and thrive within society.

In this blog post, we explore primary mathematics continuous professional development and learning (CPDL). In our [third blog post](#), we explained why primary mathematics is our case study lens as we investigate Local Learning Systems (LLS) for teacher professional development. To understand evolving local systems we wanted a focus which had been a consistent priority over time, with reasonably well established and embedded systems and processes for professional learning. Mathematics is ever-present within school improvement plans as a core curriculum subject, is a subject where many primary teachers are keen to develop their knowledge and is the focus of the most established of England's hub models for developing teaching.

Introduced in 2014, the national network of maths hubs is led by the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics (NCETM) and now consists of forty regional hubs. Last week's [NCETM newsletter](#) exemplifies how teacher professional learning in mathematics has changed over recent years. It publicises a podcast, CPD twitter chat and blended face-to-face/online subject knowledge programme. Some of the changes reflect opportunities afforded by technology, catalysed by the Covid-19 pandemic, where access and modes of CPDL have diversified.

Changes across the wider school system in England (described in this previous [blog post](#)) have also had a significant impact on how CPDL operates, including in mathematics. The structures for supporting teacher CPDL in primary mathematics have changed almost unrecognisably over the past twenty years. Where previously local authorities (LAs) were key providers this provision has been substantively replaced by maths hubs, education businesses and in-house approaches (although the extent of this varies across localities and school types). The second and third of these have long existed in England's education system but the extent and scale of their use has significantly increased as English policy has encouraged the development of a [self-improving, school-led system](#). Groups of schools in Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) can now use their pooled resources to share staff expertise, create CPDL and mathematics specific posts as well as use their collective buying power to opt for their preferred providers (sometimes related to specific schemes, programmes, textbooks or consultants).

Reflecting on major mathematics education reforms from the past and present highlights some of the changes in primary mathematics CPDL. [The National Numeracy Strategy](#) (1999), later [the Primary framework for literacy and mathematics](#) (2006), used largely [training and cascade models for CPDL](#) through the network of LAs delivering centrally developed materials through out-of-school courses (such as the 3-day and 5-day training) for individual teachers and leaders. CPDL materials were also provided to schools to lead their own CPDL twilight or day events. Whilst effective at changing primary teacher attitudes towards mathematics and utilising high quality expertise through the LA consultants, the CPDL model did not provide sufficient iterative opportunities over time and expertise naturally became more diluted through the levels of cascade ([Millett, Askew & Brown, 2004](#)).

Teacher development within Teaching for Mastery (TfM) since 2014, uses largely [transmission coaching \(initiated into the practice of the mentor/coach\) and community of practice models for CPDL](#). The network of school-based Maths Hubs lead 'work groups' of teachers from schools in their region with nationally set outcomes, using centrally developed materials. In contrast to the national strategies, the spacing of sessions allows for practice-based development and iterative learning. The collaborative element allows for more informal professional development opportunities alongside the formal ([Boylan et al., 2018](#)).

Although the Maths Hub 'work group' model has clear strengths, it also presents some challenges. For example, unlike the national strategies model which employed experts full-time within the LA to lead CPDL, the school-led approach requires hubs to negotiate time out of class for expert teachers. This is important as the CPDL could become more of a training model if the person leading it is unclear over the model and their role in it. There can also be challenges where individual teachers, rather than groups of teachers from the same school, participate in out-of-school CPDL ([Clarke 1994](#)), where issues of cascade and expertise dilution can persist.

Alongside large-scale national policy moves, there have been many other sources of CPDL for primary mathematics. The Researching Effective CPD in Mathematics Education project ([RECME 2009](#): 2) identified thirty CPD initiatives in 2007/8, for example, and classified them as either courses, within-school initiatives or networks. This demonstrates the breadth of CPDL that we need to capture in the EQuALLS research. CPDL has continued to expand since the RECME study was conducted with textbook, scheme and resource providers expanding their CPDL offers as well as private consultants and training companies. There have been other developments, such as the adoption of lesson study approaches which can provide a strong model for primary mathematics CPDL in being practice-based, sustained over time, teacher ownership orientated and supported by expert facilitation.

Clearly, in order to research how and to what extent Local Learning Systems (LLS) provide high quality, inclusive professional development for teachers in mathematics, the EQuALLS project team need to understand what high quality primary mathematics CPDL is. For this, we draw upon general and maths-specific research literature as well as the [DfE Standard for Professional Development](#) (2016) and [EEF Effective Professional Development Guidance report](#) (2021). The maths-specific literature provides a range of criteria, goals, principles and elements which characterise high quality mathematics professional development. [Heck et al. \(2019\)](#), for example, summarise the elements of high quality mathematics professional development as: duration, content focus, coherence, active/practice-based learning, collective participation and expert facilitation.

Primary teachers need maths-specific CPDL that develops a range of specialised teacher knowledge.

What is clear in the academic literature is that developing teachers' [Mathematical Knowledge for Teaching \(MKfT\)](#) is central to mathematics CPDL ([Heck et al., 2019](#)). MKfT is the knowledge involved in teaching mathematics. Adapted from [Ball et al. \(2008\)](#), it includes knowing both the subject matter (first three) and the Pedagogical Content Knowledge (final three):

- the mathematics (own ability to do the mathematics)
- the mathematics (the range of approaches or possibilities for doing the mathematics)
- the understanding that supports and is supported by this mathematics (prior and future learning)
- how to teach this mathematics
- how children learn and understand/misunderstand this mathematics
- the curriculum

Primary teachers need maths-specific CPDL that develops this range of specialised teacher knowledge. Generalist primary teachers join the profession with varied experiences and relationships with mathematics, including many that are negative ([Hodgen & Askew, 2007](#)). These prior beliefs and experiences are important as they mediate what teachers learn from CPDL ([Ball, 1996](#)) so a change in attitudes and beliefs is a worthwhile goal of CPDL ([Guskey, 2002](#)) and CPDL should build upon teachers' current understanding and experiences ([RECME 2009](#)). High quality CPDL is also underpinned by research evidence but this should be balanced with other types of evidence and critical engagement to avoid reducing teacher agency ([Rycroft-Smith & Macey, 2021](#)). Attention to teacher agency in CPDL can also support quality where it addresses issues in mathematics teaching which are of concern or interest to the teachers ([Clark, 1994](#)).

The recent changes across England's school system provide alternative mechanisms for teacher change (changing face) and different key players in mathematics CPDL (changing faces). In our view, Local Learning Systems have the potential to provide the opportunities, support and mechanisms for high quality CPDL, through the various [features of a LLS](#) that we identified in our [first blog post](#). However, we also worry that the changes are more haphazard, providing differing levels of access, equity and quality for schools and teachers. The EQualLS team are currently interviewing school leaders, mathematics subject leads and class teachers in a sample of primary schools in three localities across England to find out about the source, nature, quality and impact of mathematics professional learning in these schools. Future blog posts will report on what we find through our analysis of these and what this tells us about local learning systems for primary mathematics CPDL.

The EQualLS three localities: What does 'local' mean in these school systems?

By Andy Noyes and Cath Gripton

15th Jul 2022

Having discussed some of the key aspects of the shifting schooling landscape, teacher professional learning for primary maths and our research design, this post (number 7) introduces our three 'locals'. We highlight some key features of each locality, consider whether they are on the same change trajectory and highlight the complexity of the notion of 'local'.

In an earlier post, we discussed the fragmentation of education in England. Previously there were nested systems (like Russian dolls) of feeder primaries and secondaries, within boroughs, within counties/unitary authorities, within government office regions. These nested hierarchies are a thing of the past, at least as a single organising principle. The bricolage that is the new educational landscape overlays the previous nested geography with new networks, hubs, trusts, regions, clusters and the like. Only some of these are bounded geographically. Each hub system, for example, has a different geography which divides up areas along different lines. In this context 'local' needs reimagining. This is a theme that runs through our team discussions, and these blogs.



In terms of scale, 'local' can be considered in three ways:

- 1) from the ground up (i.e. for individuals or schools and their communities)
- 2) from the top down (e.g. hubs, DfE regional directors)
- 3) from the middle in/out (e.g. MATs, LAs, Headteacher networks etc.)

It is clear that one educator's local is not the same as another's (discussed in our second blog post), even when they are colleagues in the same school or year group. Indeed, each person thinks within multiple locals, based on their particular activities, roles, histories and locations. A Headteacher might think themselves as working within the head teacher group in the local town, the MAT (Multi-Academy Trust) of which they are a part and the wider city/shire from which they draw support including for CPDL (Continued Professional Development and Learning). Here, the Headteacher's local is actually three different 'locals' which occupy different geographic areas and contain different schools. MATs, with their varied sizes, centring, reach and 'flavour' (e.g. more or less standardising), have quite distinctive 'locals' which have stronger or looser boundaries and can have extensive geographic reach for the largest MATs. These labyrinthine 'locals' are further complicated as that head teacher works within the 'local' footprints of multiple hubs, each with its peculiar size, intensity and centre of gravity. At present there are 40 Maths Hubs, 34 English Hubs, 34 Computing Hubs, 22 Behaviour Hubs and 87 Teaching School Hubs in England. Each hub system draws different geographic boundaries, distributing the nation's schools differently in each hub system. In addition, there are 28 Research Schools operating with their own footprints. Our Headteacher has a designated Maths, English, Computing, Behaviour and Teaching School Hub as well as a Research School. These may or may not reflect one or more of the multiple locals that they identify with. All of this makes for a heady mix of foci, demands, sources of support, provision of advice and offers of CPDL opportunities. This is the central area of concern to the EQuaLLs team, in particular because this landscape has important implications for equity and quality in professional learning for schools.

Three cases

Our three localities have been selected assuming that they are distinctive cases of reforming local learning systems. Whether they are broadly representative of the range of local learning systems, we cannot say but there is sufficient difference – as well as similarity – to be rich and interesting cases.

The three localities are based in large part on 'old' educational geographies, on city, town and shire boundaries. We aimed for areas that included around 60-90 primary schools which resulted in us sampling part of a large city, an entire town and a half of a shire. In addition to

interviewing a range of system leaders in each locality (such as those discussed in our fourth blog post), we worked with 6/7 primary schools, interviewing the head teachers, maths leads and a classroom teacher in each. So in each locality we have spoken with around 30 people, from those with the broadest 'helicopter view' to those very rooted in classrooms. The schools were sampled on a principle of maximal variation, considering size, attainment, FSM, EAL, school type and Ofsted grading.

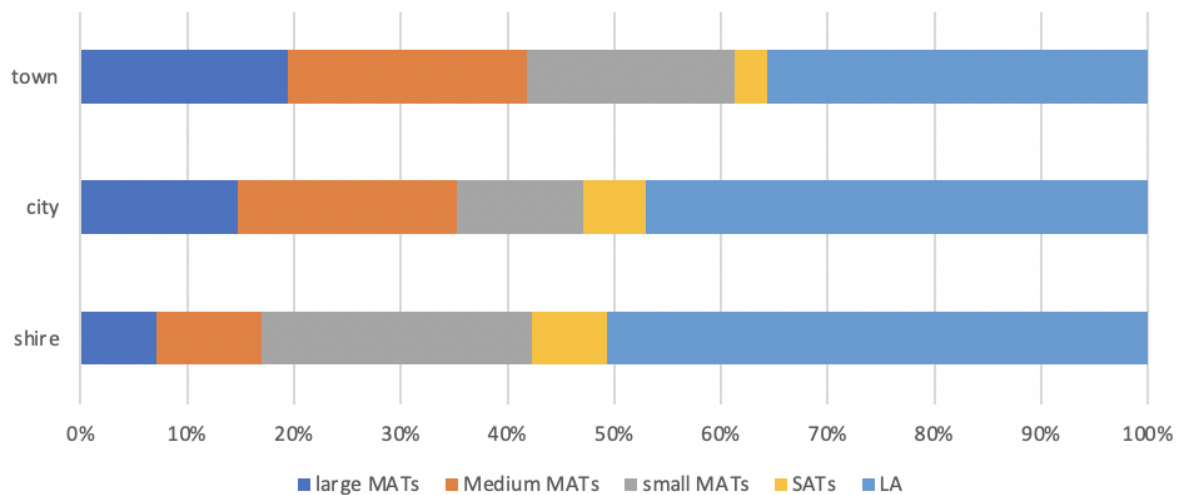
If, as is suggested in the 2022 government white paper, the future of the education system is large MATs, the three localities can be viewed as being at different points on that journey (see figure 1). Town has over 40% of its primaries in medium (6-15 schools) and large (16+ schools) MATs, more than twice the proportion in Shire. This might have something to do with the density of schools in Town compared to Shire, with its population/school clusters separated by sparsely populated rural zones. We characterise the three localities as 'recent mover' (town), 'first mover' (city) and 'assimilator' (shire)

The 'recent mover' had a proportion of schools moved to large MATs due to performance concerns. A number of these were quite early on in the academisation process. More recently, the rate of schools choosing to become academies has accelerated with a number of small and medium local MATs forming along existing partnerships and networks. The name 'recent mover' aims to capture the shift in the last 2-3 years with the balance of Town schools now having tipped to around two thirds being academies. Academisation is spread quite evenly across the geographic area meaning that there are a mixture of schools in MATs or SATs (Single-Academy Trusts) and schools that are maintained by the LA (Local Authority) located in close proximity throughout. Historic networks for CPDL have largely disappeared meaning that most is provided within the MAT or individual school. It is challenging to establish new networks in this varied and shifting school system.

The 'first mover' was relatively quick to academise with the Local Authority swiftly receding and moving to a traded offer as medium and larger MATs formed quite early on in the academisation policy. These trusts grew up along existing networks and partnerships with many of the schools that were key in organising these MATs taking on local leadership, hosting and partnering with curriculum hubs as these developed. The system in City has been relatively stable since the early shift with approximately half of schools academies.

The 'assimilator' has maintained an influential coordinating role for primary heads group, albeit decoupled from its original Local Authority oversight. The social capital in this group provides a dense network that does an effective job of moderating or assimilating new arrivals (leaders of new school and system leaders) into the area. A network of high-level boundary spanners sit on one another's boards. This coordinating network is independent and leading the way in producing new platforms for knowledge exchange and facilitation of CPDL. Large MATs seem to have little influence in this locality and new CPDL providers access schools through the established, stable network.

School composition in each locality



An interesting feature of our localities is the spatial geography of the locality and locations of the centre of gravity of the hubs to the location of the schools across the areas. Shire is remote from both the Teaching School and Maths Hub, both of which access the locality by assimilating into the existing network of head teachers and teaching schools through which most of the social capital in the locality is mobilised. This is the same for Town but there is not an existing network for the hubs to work with and the proportion of schools in larger MATs is much higher so these are more influential in determining school engagement with hubs. The situation in City is quite different with both the Maths and Teaching School Hub in this small geographic areas which is densely populated with primary schools.

Our three localities have shown us just how many versions of 'local' are operating simultaneously. We now appreciate more keenly the level of complexity involved in navigating the local learning system for primary mathematics CPDL. We found similarities but substantial differences between our three localities which suggests that each is reforming differently based on varied historic and geographic structures and relationships. In each locality, system and school leaders are adjusting and adapting to try to make the local learning system work but there are challenges for them, including existing within multiple 'locals', as we have shown. We still have many questions, one of which concerns the representativeness of the three localities. Are they representative of most similar sized City, Town and Shire localities? What proportion of localities are like each of these three? Are there other types that are unique, distinctive or more extreme versions of our three?

Competition and Collaboration in Local Learning Landscapes- where next for policy?

By Toby Greany
28th Sep 2022

A new policy landscape?

In our previous blogposts we have set out the thinking that underpins the EQualLS research project as well as some of the emerging themes and issues we are exploring (such as 'place', 'boundary spanners' and teacher learning). We have also outlined our research design, which has involved interviewing local system leaders and visiting 6/7 primary schools in each of our three localities – City, Town and Shire – to understand how schools and teachers engage in professional learning for mathematics. We are currently working to finalise our analysis and draft the project report, which will be published in early December.

In this post, we step back to consider our findings in the context of recent policy developments, including the schools [white paper](#), published in March, which set out plans for every school to join a 'strong' Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). Clearly, much has changed in the policy world since March, and Prime Minister Truss has asked the new ministerial team to pause the Schools Bill – which had already hit serious [roadblocks](#) – while the government considers its priorities. Despite this pause, it seems unlikely that the government will abandon its plans, and the retention of Baroness Barran as Minister for the School System makes this all the more likely. However, there will undoubtedly be changes in how the plans are now taken forward. Back in March, the schools white paper was published hard on the heels of Michael Gove's Levelling Up [white paper](#), which put devolution and place-based working centre stage, including through plans for 55 'educational investment areas'. As yet, it is not clear whether and how Liz Truss' government will remain committed to levelling up, but the priority for the new education ministers is clearly [grammar schools](#) and increasing parental choice. Previous [research](#) has shown that increased choice is associated with increased competition between schools, and this is likely to be accentuated by tight budgets and a demographic drop in pupil numbers. In this context, collaboration between schools and MATs will be more challenging, so it is concerning that the government has removed the expectation for MATs to collaborate with each other and with local partners from the draft Schools Bill.

Fragmentation and reformation in local learning landscapes

One consistent theme across the project blogposts has been that the school system in England – including the arrangements for continuous professional development and learning (CPDL) – is complex, and that this has important implications for quality and equity in CPDL. In [high performing and high equity school systems around the world](#), the 'middle tier' that operates between schools and central government plays a key role in ensuring local coherence, including through high quality CPDL that all schools can access. In contrast, we characterise the overarching process of change in England since 2010 in terms of 'fragmentation and reformation.' This reflects the move from place-based oversight of schools by Local Authorities (LAs), to network-based oversight by MATs. However, as anyone involved in schools will know, this process of change is incomplete, inconsistent and all-too-often seemingly incoherent.

The EQuaLLS research is focussed on understanding how these developments are playing at local levels. In our last [blogpost](#), Andy Noyes and Cath Gripton characterised our assessment of the three localities at headline level, distinguishing between Town's (aka 'recent mover') rapid shift towards a majority of primary schools in non-local medium and large MATs, City's (aka 'first mover') more established model of local and regional MATs, and Shire's (aka 'assimilator') approach in which a school-funded coordinating network helps to communicate and integrate new initiatives.

MATs and the future of local collaboration and CPDL

One clear finding from existing [research on MATs](#), which the EQuaLLS findings serve to reinforce, is that MAT leaders are working to create internally coherent and consistent approaches to CPDL within each trust, because this supports wider efforts to generate a shared culture and aligned practices across member schools. This raises the question of whether the move to greater coherence *within* MATs will lead to greater incoherence *among* them, making local collaboration and knowledge exchange between schools that are in different MATs more difficult? (Sidenote, I discuss these issues with three US researchers – Josh Glazer, Meg Duff and William Berry – comparing MATs and US middle tier developments [here](#)).

More recent work by members of this team (Greany, Cowhitt and Downey, forthcoming) has highlighted a second trend: although the [majority](#) of small and medium-sized MATs operate within one government region, MATs are not really 'local', in that they do not operate all the schools in one town or locality. Instead, even those MATs that have a clear geographic focus tend to oversee a subset of schools in that locality, while larger MATs might operate multiple local hubs. In fact, [the government has made clear](#) that it wants to 'avoid local monopolies (i.e. one MAT operating all the schools in one locality) which are not in the interest of parents' (p6).

Meanwhile, Teaching School Hubs, Maths and other curriculum hubs, Behaviour Hubs and Research Schools have been tasked with working laterally, across differing regional footprints, to engage schools and MATs in CPDL and knowledge sharing. These hub-based offers overlap with various other forms of CPDL available to schools, including from LAs, from other schools and MATs, from edu-businesses and online. The EQuaLLS project has revealed examples of Maths Hubs working successfully with a range of different MATs in their area, arguably helping to ensure that these trusts and the schools within them can learn from each other. But EQuaLLS has also identified examples of closed MATs, which operate as 'boundary keepers', by preventing staff from engaging with the Maths Hub because this might cut across the trust's internal approach to maths teaching and CPDL.

Where does this leave us?

The government wants to see choice for parents and to avoid local MAT monopolies. Back in March, the government was also committed to levelling up and place-based development – which included a commitment to encouraging collaboration between MATs (which is not to say legislating for collaboration would have made it happen!) The new ministerial team has not stopped existing work on 'educational investment areas' and it still is expected that the Department's new Regional Directors will publish local capacity plans for MAT consolidation and development in the next few months. However, the new focus on grammar schools,

choice and competition seems likely to make MAT to MAT collaboration more difficult, while the removal of any requirement for MATs to collaborate from the Schools Bill seems to indicate a loss of commitment to this ambition.

Meanwhile, schools and teacher will continue to need access to high quality CPDL and expertise, wherever that may come from.