Confederation
of School Trusts

Integrating practices as Trusts grow

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The voice of School Trusts

CST is the national organisation and sector body for academy and multi-academy Trusts - advocating for, connecting and supporting executive and governance leaders in School Trusts.

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We are governed by a Board of Trustees and are subject to the regulations of the Charity Commission and accountable to our members.

We are strictly apolitical. We work with the government of the day, political parties and politicians across the spectrum to advance education for public benefit.

CST's mission is to build an excellent education system in England, with every school part of a strong and sustainable group in which every child is a powerful learner and adults learn and develop together as teachers and leaders.

Our vision is a system which holds trust on behalf of children.

**Published March 2022
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Our values:

Selflessness	Openness
Integrity	Honesty
Objectivity	Leadership
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As we move towards a school system in which all schools are part of a Trust, it is right that Trusts undergoing growth, as well as those schools joining a Trust, consider the benefits and challenges of integrating into a group of schools.

Much of this is addressed through the vitally important due diligence processes that Trusts and schools undertake. However, this paper extends the essence of due diligence beyond the legal and business undertaking to consider what it is to integrate professional practices as part of Trust growth.

This remains an area that is relatively weakly theorised and poorly researched. For example, research pertaining to integration within a Trust has typically focused on the perceived pros and cons, such as surveying the views of those leaders and teachers (DfE, 2021). There appears to be relatively little research carried out that attempts to theorise how professional knowledge and practices are integrated and brought together as Trusts grow and the implications of this for Trust growth. As a result, potentially helpful insight is concealed which may help Trusts to make the integration of schools into the Trust smoother and more effective.

In particular, what we see in the discourse around integration is an emphasis on the notion of 'autonomy', but there is little explanatory depth; the range of phenomena over which autonomy is held, how it exists, and the purposes for such autonomy often remain under-theorised. For example, a recent report (DfE, 2021) stated that "for some, their concern about loss of autonomy was about a more general desire to retain control over decision making." The problem here is not whether autonomy is inherently valuable or not, but rather the discourse around it threatens to establish a form of educational relativism where any practice is held to be as good as any other. For example, if a practice or educational purpose is shown clearly not to be in the best interests of children, should this be allowed to continue in the interests of autonomy? At its worst this risks privileging adult autonomy ahead of the interest of children.

Within the existing research, integration tends to be seen primarily as a reflection of the extent of control exerted by the Trust. Accordingly, we tend to see this expressed as scales of autonomy, understood only as the outcome of the given power dynamic. While the exploration of power within integrative relationships is important, it is problematic if the emphasis on this means we are blind to the nature, form and purposes of what is being integrated, in part because it is conceivable that there are other factors at play.

Greany and McGinity (2021) have constructed a model which considers a range of goods that might be integrated when a school joins a Trust (including knowledge). This is further reaching than many similar studies but they conclude by establishing a fixed taxonomy of four categories of Trust ('family', 'kingdom', 'machine', 'institution'). The effect of this is to lose some of the report's earlier nuance. While broad categories might be born out to some degree in the management behaviours of the Trusts, we might wonder if different goods within the integration might sit in different places in the taxonomy. There is also a question about whether static taxonomies can capture the nature of integration itself - before and during the process - or whether they tend to be a retrospective description of integrations that have already taken place.

While there is value in exploring the power dynamics of integration (perceived and actual), we must not assume that what is integrated (or not) is arbitrary and simply the expression of power; there may be something about the thing itself that is being integrated (such as professional practice), or the nature of the organisations being integrated, that supports or complicates integration.

In order to resolve this problem we need to build a more sophisticated and dynamic framework of understanding around how schools integrate, one that more readily allows us to change focus to explore the nature of different aspects of integration. Based on the theorisation of the integration of practices within Legitimation Code Theory (Maton 2014; Maton & Howard 2018), this paper tentatively floats a theoretical framework which may help Trusts to consider integration in new ways.

Practice and purpose

At its most simple we can view the process of integrating organisations as bringing objects ('things' in the broadest sense) into relation with each other in certain ways. That is to say that there are things (**constituents**) that are brought together and turned towards particular **purposes**. Accordingly, key concerns tend to be 'who/what are we bringing together?' and '*for what purpose?*'

In the case of Trust growth, constituents can be various. For example, by entering into a Trust, schools might bring together things like finance operations, physical infrastructure, workforce, curriculum, CPD and many more. Similarly, there can also be multiple purposes involved in Trust growth, including improving teaching quality, enhancing extra-curricular opportunities, improving the Trust's financial capacity, achieving strategic objectives and so on. The point here is not to illustrate every constituent part of Trust growth, nor to identify every possible purpose, rather simply to illustrate that both constituents and purposes can be various and so it is helpful for us to be specific.

Integrating professional knowledge and practice

For the illustrative aims of this paper, we will build out from the charitable purpose at the heart of most school Trusts: to improve education for the public benefit. We know from research that teacher quality is the biggest single factor in improving the quality of education, so we will use the professional practice of teachers as our constituent object of study. In practical terms, this might be thought of as the professional knowledge that our teachers hold. This is the knowledge they have about what to teach, how to teach it, how to assess and so on. While much of this exists in the minds of individual teachers, and accordingly we have to acknowledge that within schools and Trusts there are different conceptions, shared understandings of this professional knowledge and practice can nonetheless be seen in curriculum documents, training programmes, school policies and so on. Of course, each of these could be investigated separately but for the illustrative purposes of this paper we will view them together as 'what teachers in this Trust know and do'.

We can therefore summarise these two elements of integration as follows
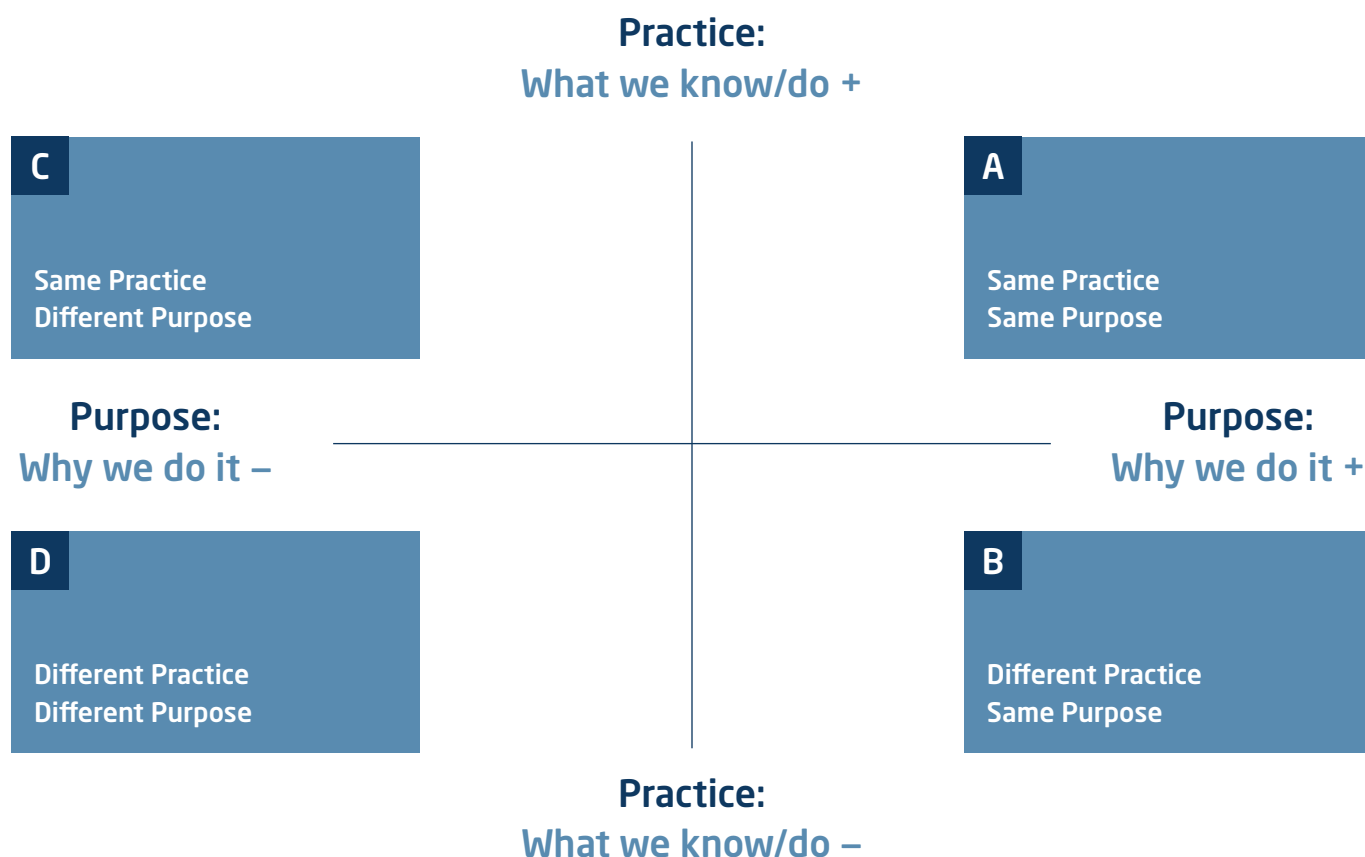
- **Constituent** (what we do/know) = professional knowledge and practice of teachers
- **Purpose** = improving education within the Trust

It's also important to be explicit about whose perspective we are viewing integration from. For illustrative purposes, this paper will look at it from the perspective of the Trust that is integrating a new school. We can say that we have within our Trust particular professional knowledge and practice (ways of knowing and doing teaching) that are seen to be valuable, and that these are turned to the particular purpose of improving education for our children.

We can plot these on a Cartesian plane to help us visualise how the incoming school relates to the existing Trust. Figure 1 shows a spectrum of professional knowledge and practice on the y axis. The positive end indicates the knowledge and practices of the Trust, not because such practices are necessarily positive but because the + denotes the knowledge and practices are held by the Trust and are, therefore, strongly associated with that Trust. At the other end of spectrum resides other knowledge and practice that is very different, for example that representing different understandings of effective teaching or a different conception of professional knowledge. If the incoming school tends to have professional knowledge and practice that are very similar to the Trust then it could be said to be + on that axis.

Practice:
What we know/do +

C Same Practice Different Purpose	**A** Same Practice Same Purpose

Purpose:
Why we do it –

Purpose:
Why we do it +

D Different Practice Different Purpose	**B** Different Practice Same Purpose

Practice:
What we know/do –

Figure 1

Across the x axis we can plot purpose in a similar way. At the positive end we can plot the purpose already outlined above – to improve education. In contrast, at the negative end we can locate purposes that are different. Again, + and – do not denote a value judgment here, just a heuristic indicator of how far the purpose is similar or different to that of the Trust. It is plausible that this might be seen in vision and mission statements but it could also reside tacitly, for example in the views expressed by teachers and pupils. Indeed, it is plausible that what is expressed in a mission statement is different to the 'feel' on the ground. So, working out purpose might require some careful exploration.

Practice & purpose instead of arbitrary autonomy

With these two elements mapped on a Cartesian plane, as in figure 1, we can begin to consider the integrative relationship between the Trust and an incoming school. In the quadrant marked A we see what we might instinctively consider our target – the new school holds the same knowledge and practices as those within the Trust and deploys them for the same purpose (to improve education). This might be referred to as 'alignment'. In theory, at least with regard to practice and purpose, it seems likely that integration of this school into the Trust should be reasonably straightforward.

Powerfully, it also shines a new light on the issue of autonomy. Rather than it being a question of arbitrary control, we can now ask exactly what it is that autonomy should be exercised over. For example, is it appropriate for the incoming school to hold a different purpose or practice? The Trust and incoming school might conclude that quadrant B is the best basis for integration, at least initially – the Trust and its constituent schools are working towards the same purpose but potentially with different practices. Such an understanding opens the door for evaluative work in the future to explore how well these different practices in the incoming school are serving the intended purpose. If the practices are not seen to be delivering the intended purpose then perhaps there are reasonable grounds in the future to consider whether the school should align its practice more closely with the Trust (assuming the Trust practices are delivering on the purpose). This moves us beyond a binary understanding of autonomy towards something more nuanced: practice and purpose.

So, what does this tell us? Does this tell us that this alignment should be a necessary precursor for Trust growth? Perhaps not. It may be the case that some schools, including some being sponsored, are not delivering against their defined purpose and so it may be seen as right for them to align professional practices with those of the Trust from the outset. If this is being done in order to deliver a purpose which is in the interests of children it may be hard to argue with this position. Indeed, appeals to autonomy sometimes miss this fundamental point: where autonomy exists in education it should be for the benefit of children. If practices established on the basis of autonomy are not benefitting children then they're probably not meeting their purpose and as such it is understandable when they are subject to review and change by the accountable body (the Trust). This is, after all, one reason why school Trusts are the primary agent of school improvement in the system, and why CST continues to urge caution and nuance in relation to the invocation of autonomy as a relational principle.

Integration as a return trip

But there is another reason why the basis of integration may not be alignment in quadrant A, one that points towards the potential of incoming schools to add to Trusts, even where there are differences.
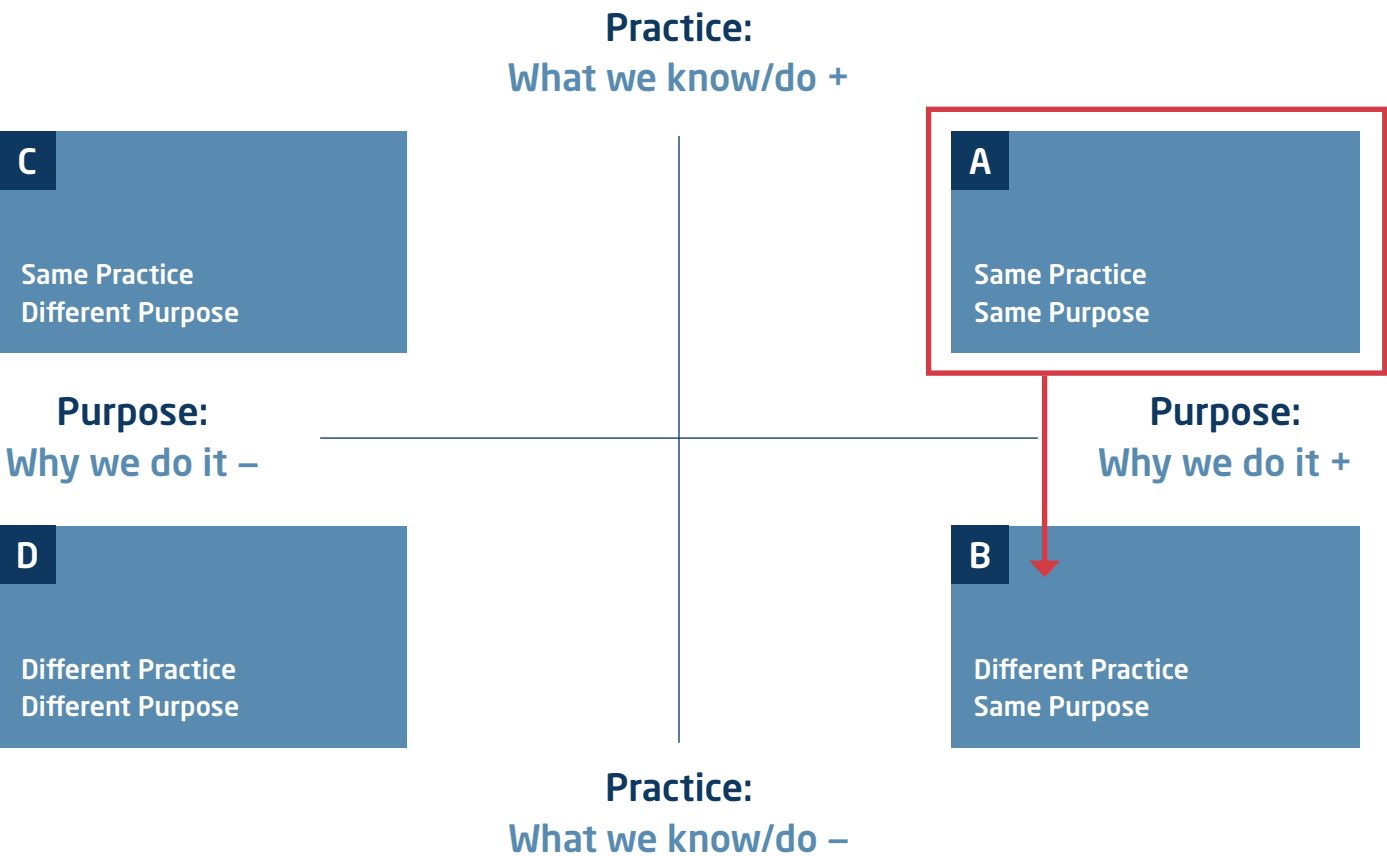
Practice:
What we know/do +

C	A
Same Practice **Different Purpose**	**Same Practice** **Same Purpose**

Purpose:
Why we do it –

Purpose:
Why we do it +

D	B
Different Practice **Different Purpose**	**Different Practice** **Same Purpose**

Practice:
What we know/do –

Figure 2 : Integrating different practices

Imagine a scenario where the existing knowledge and practices held within a Trust are not leading to improved educational quality for pupils. In such a situation the Trust might reasonably conclude that while its purpose is right, the professional knowledge and/or practices in the Trust are not. This Trust might favour integration of a new school precisely because it holds *different* professional knowledge and practices that the Trust wants to integrate. We can see this position reflected in the solid line in quadrant B, figure 2, where other knowledge and practice is being turned towards the Trust's purpose.

However, it's worth sounding one note of caution. In this situation it is unlikely to be sufficient for such 'other' knowledge and practices to stay as 'other'; they need to become the professional knowledge and practice of the Trust. In essence, this means moving the knowledge and practices represented in quadrant B into quadrant A (hence the dashed line in figure 3). It may be useful to think of this as a car ride. The aim here isn't just to pass through the beautiful scenery of quadrant B and admire the view, it is to stop and fill the car up with as much of that as you can carry and return it to quadrant A (indeed, this might take many car trips!). That is to say, the 'other' must become integrated.
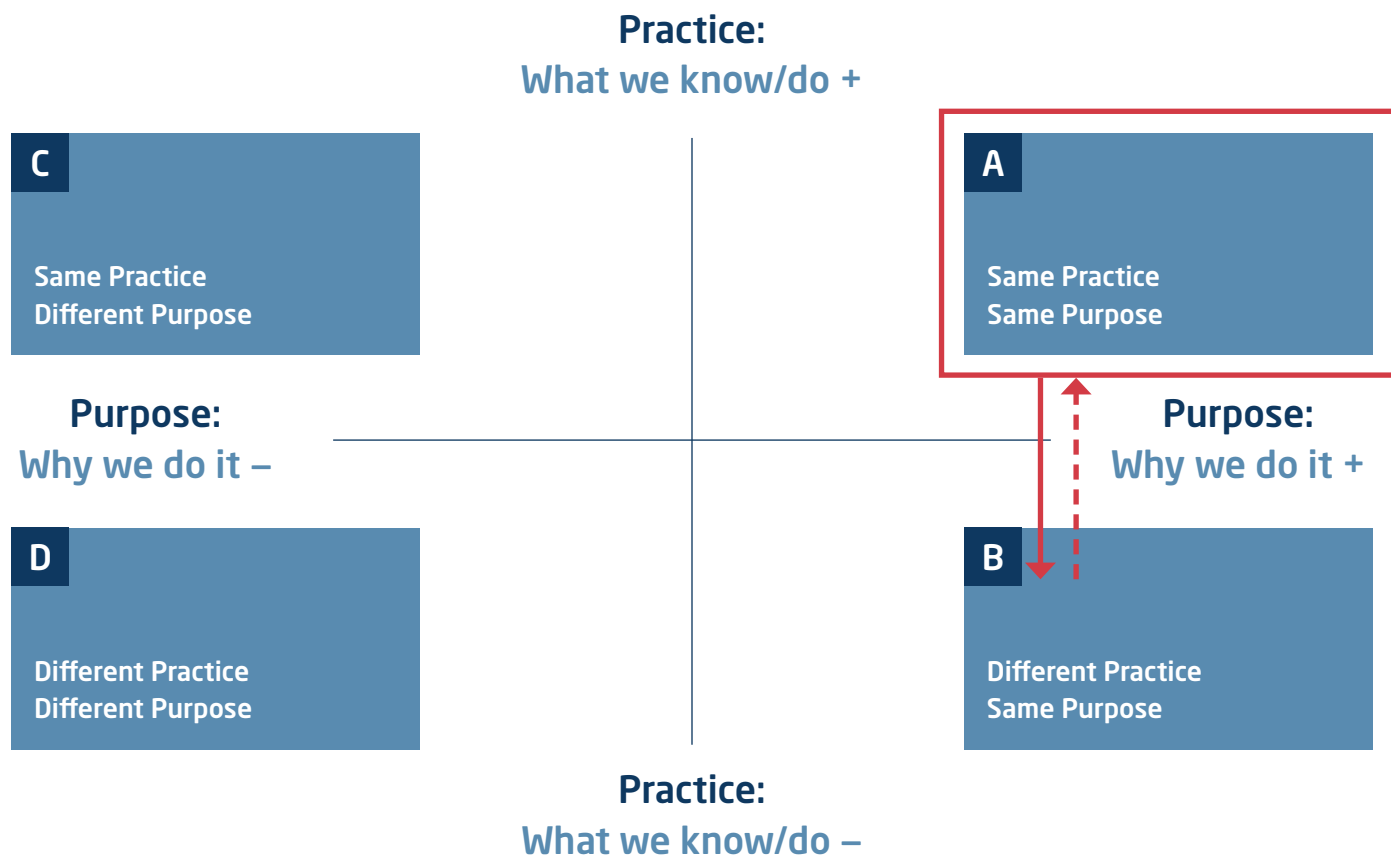

Figure 3 : Bringing it back home

Different purposes

In quadrant C, figure 4, we can see a range of different scenarios. Here we see the incoming school holding the same professional knowledge and practice as the Trust but being put to a different purpose. Accordingly, such purposes could be manifold. Perhaps the key thing to draw out here is the potential for difference between the stated purpose(s) of the school joining the Trust and other purposes which may be at play, perhaps tacitly or unconsciously. This could give rise to misunderstanding or suspicion if motives are not explicit and understood. It may be that resolving this difference is an important part of integrating the school into the vision and values of the Trust. Again, it may be that this involves aligning the school's purpose(s) with those of the Trust, but it could also be that the process of integrating the school leads to change in the Trust's mission. Understanding and reconciling some of these differences may be particularly important when Trusts integrate faith schools.

Finally, quadrant D sees other knowledge and practices being put to a different purpose. While it's a stretch to say that Trust growth characterised by this quadrant is inherently undesirable, it might carry particular risks, such as a clash between purpose as well as a different underlying body of professional knowledge and practice. That said, it is conceivable that integration in this way could be productive. Moreover, it must be remembered the analysis here is looking at the practices and purposes of teachers. It could be that while pedagogic practice and purposes of teachers are not aligned with the Trust there may be other areas of professional expertise, such as finance or HR, which might be used to fulfil a different purpose, such as improving Trust finances so that more funds can be used to support a new CPD programme, the intent of which is to ultimately impact positively on the quality of education. This type of more circuitous understanding of integration and how it relates to the core purpose of the Trust is by no means a bad thing and probably underpins many Trust growth strategies, but the key point is that in explaining it we have made the relationship explicit. That is to say that improving the business knowledge of the Trust is not perhaps an end in itself, it is ultimately working to support the core aim of the Trust.
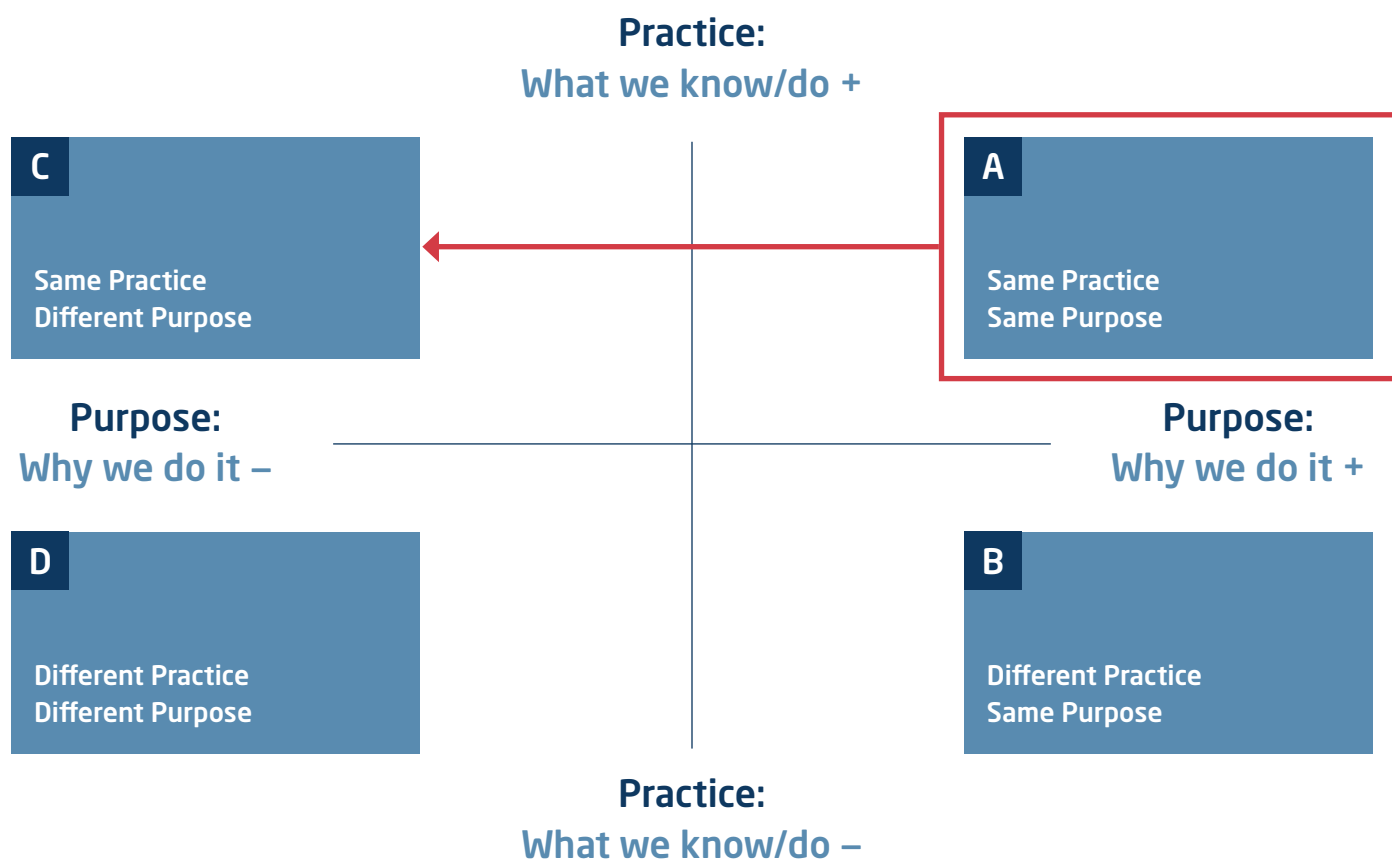
Practice:
What we know/do +

C Same Practice Different Purpose	**A** Same Practice Same Purpose

Purpose:
Why we do it –

Purpose:
Why we do it +

D Different Practice Different Purpose	**B** Different Practice Same Purpose

Practice:
What we know/do –

Figure 4

The framing in this paper may also be useful in helping to provide a route map for integration between the Trust and the incoming school if they are found to have different purposes and practices. For example, it may be that a decision is taken to start aligning vision and values in the first instance with it being a longer-term objective to reach closer alignment between professional knowledge and practices.
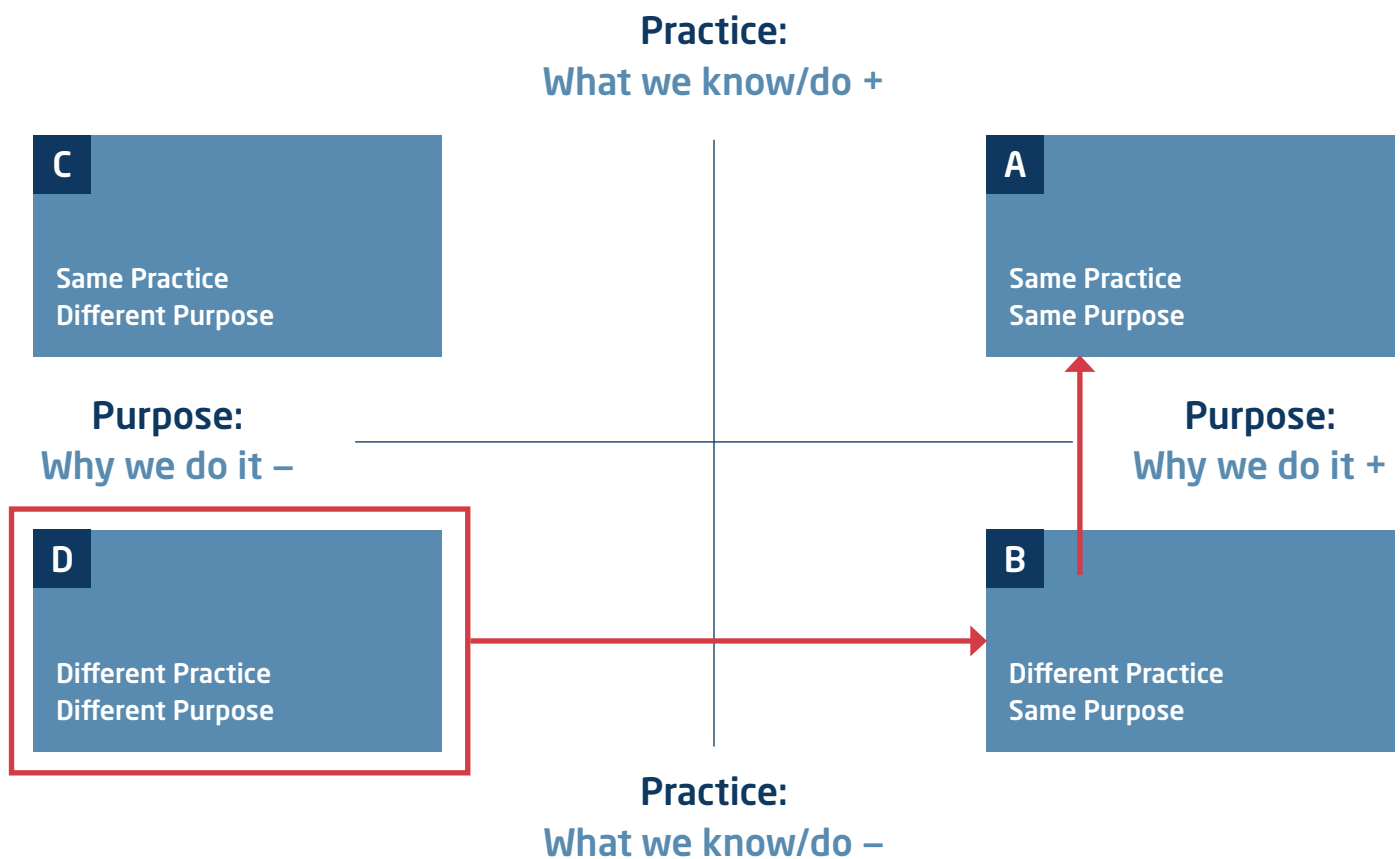
Practice:
What we know/do +

C

Same Practice
Different Purpose

Purpose:
Why we do it –

Purpose:
Why we do it +

A

Same Practice
Same Purpose

D

Different Practice
Different Purpose

B

Different Practice
Same Purpose

Practice:
What we know/do –

Figure 5: A route map for integration

As we did above, we might see this as a metaphorical car ride of sorts. Arguably, the risk for integration is less about undertaking this journey and more about not making the route clear to those who will be joining us on the ride. This speaks to the need for strong communication to help all involved to understand the plan, and how it relates to our purpose. We might speculate that sometimes where integration is not as smooth as we would like that this may be down to us not mapping such routes effectively for stakeholders.

Reflections

The purpose of this paper is not to make empirical or generalised claims about how and why integrations between Trusts and schools should take place, but we hope it provides some concepts for how Trusts might think and talk about integration in ways that move beyond those typically portrayed in research discourse.

In particular, the approach encourages us to consider the **constituents** and **purposes** involved in integration and to consider their relations. As outlined above, this adds greater explanatory power to discussions about autonomy. The four quadrants in this framework are not intended to be fixed typologies. The aim isn't simply to place schools and Trusts in the various quadrants as an empirical description of them. Rather, the framework assumes practices and purposes within an integration are potentially dynamic. Accordingly, it is more important to consider how aspects of schools and Trusts relate to each other than it is to place them into a particular category. In this framework, the quadrants illuminate the relationship rather than being an end in themselves.

A further point to note is that illustration in this paper is deliberately positioned at a fairly 'top level' view. It is plausible that the framework will be more informative the more precise we can be in defining its referents.

For example, rather than looking at 'professional practice' in the broad sense, it may be more useful to be specific; perhaps looking at things like curriculum intent, the behaviour policy, early reading, and so on. It also does not have to be constrained by looking at teacher practice. It could equally be turned to consider HR practice, financial practices or site management.

It may be a useful activity to undertake an analysis such as this alongside, or before, the usual due diligence work that Trusts already do as they integrate schools into the Trust or using it as a framework for considering how well integrated the Trust's existing schools are and where additional activity may be required.

As Trusts continue to grow and consolidate over the coming years we need to find ways to have better conversations about integration. We hope the thinking outlined in this paper makes a worthwhile contribution to this.
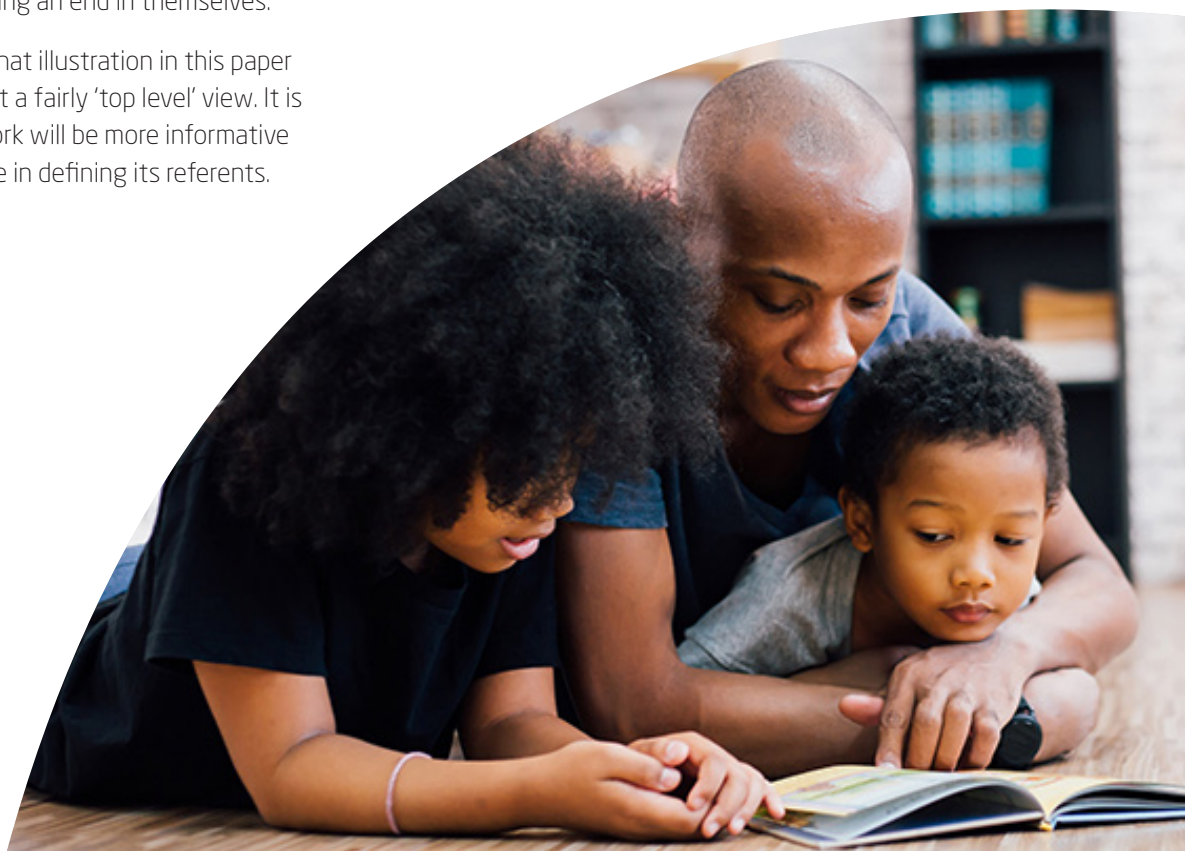
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