Confederation of School Trusts

Trust quality: an overview of research

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Executive summary

Trusts have become a central part of the English education system, providing the core of school-to-school support, improvement and governance. This means that it is increasingly important for us to know what high quality looks like in a trust. In this paper we have reviewed the evidence from four countries: England, the US, the Netherlands and Sweden. The latter three countries were chosen as they have somewhat similar (though by no means identical) systems.

This literature review draws on a search conducted using several evidence bases, websites of government agencies, and a general google search. We also drew on the references to other studies in those sources.

We found a relative dearth of evidence on quality factors in trusts across the nations studied. **This is not to say that trusts are not effective, but rather that the research into their effectiveness is limited.** Most research focuses on a limited number of topics, leading to major omissions in the evidence base. There is, for example, very little emphasis on curriculum. There are nevertheless some key conclusions we can draw from this evidence base.

1. There is overall support for the five dimensions of quality developed by CST: *quality of education, expert governance, workforce resilience and wellbeing, efficiency and effectiveness,* and *public benefit and civic duty*, albeit that the evidence is stronger in the first three of these then in the latter two.

2. The role of *trustees* is central to strong trusts. This entails effective *oversight and accountability,* and requires a strong and broad knowledge and skills base within boards, encompassing at least educational knowledge, finance, HR and legal.

3. As well as oversight and accountability, a key role of the trust is to *provide support and professional development* to their schools. This means fostering collaboration and mutual learning, and drawing on internal strengths to develop high quality CPD.

4. Quality of education is fostered by an emphasis on improving the *quality of teaching* and giving school leaders the tools and space to exercise *instructional leadership*.

5. Civic duty is an imperative for trusts. Failing trusts are less likely to show *moral purpose*.

1. Introduction

Trusts have become a central part of the English education system, providing the core of school-to-school support, improvement and governance. In light of these established roles it is important for us to move the debate on from stale discussions on the respective roles of trusts and other school types within the system, and to focus on what we can do to ensure that trusts are as effective as they can be. This is of course a policy and practice imperative, but should also be a key research driver. The question we therefore seek to answer in this paper is 'what do we know quality in trusts?'

This question is the key one to understanding how we can further develop the self-improving education system but is not necessarily a straightforward one to answer and may necessitate further exploration through research and practice. In the first instance, however, it is important to look at what evidence already exists. We have done this by looking at the English research base, but also at research from three countries that have relatively comparable educational structures: the US, the Netherlands and Sweden.

2. Scope of the study

In this review we have explicitly looked at the evidence on what leads to high quality in trusts. We were particularly interested in research on those factors which trusts can act upon. This means that we are not looking primarily at research on the overall impact or effectiveness of trusts as a model, but rather at what leads to high quality within trusts and at what trusts can do to further improve quality. To broaden our evidence base as much as possible, we have looked internationally.

In looking at the evidence we have structured our discussion around the five core areas described in the discussion paper 'what is a strong trust', published by CST in February 2022.

2.1. Definitions

While a range of definitions of quality in education exist (e.g., Cheng & Tam, 1997), we define *quality* as the extent to which an organisation excels in meeting its objectives, and thus are looking for those factors that allow trusts to do so. Objectives can of course be varied. Pupil attainment is one, but is by no means the only objective of a trust, which may include quality of curriculum, behaviour, pedagogy, sustainability etc. This means that in the evidence base we have looked further than the research that calculates correlations between trust characteristics and pupil outcomes, to include any studies looking at e.g., impact on the curriculum, pedagogy, or sustainability. In their discussion paper CST define five domains of effective trusts: quality of education, expert governance, workforce resilience and wellbeing, efficiency and effectiveness, and public benefit and civic duty. We have looked at the available evidence for each domain.

In this paper we define a *trust* as a group of schools working together in a single entity. This broad definition allows us to look at structures and systems in other countries, which is a necessity in considering the national evidence base.

2.2. International contexts

While the UK is obviously our country of interest, we have drawn on evidence on similar types of structures in other countries. There are not a large number of countries that have comparable structures to trusts, and in no case is the context exactly the same. However, the Netherlands ('Stichtingen'), the US ('Charter Management Organisations') and Sweden (chains of free schools) provide reasonably comparable structures which we have also examined in this review.

Reasonably comparable still requires the caveat that significant differences exist in the structure of these organisations and the education systems they work in.

Stichtingen in the Netherlands, for example, tend to be geographically clustered. There are currently no large national organisations akin to the 'system' trusts in England. Stichtingen also in majority have a dual structure, with a supervisory board overseeing an executive board. The latter is typically small, often made up of just one or two governors. In turn, these governors tend to delegate a lot of their legal responsibilities to individual schools and their leaders, meaning that there is often a significant amount of variance in practices within the group. Stichtingen have considerable autonomy within the Dutch education system, and are financed through a block grant. Accountability has a focus on the level of the Stichting, for example in inspection. As in England the government has promoted the

formation of boards covering multiple schools, which currently cover over 60% of schools in the system. Of these, the majority run between 2 and 10 schools (Stevenson et al, 2021).

Charter Management Organisations in the US arose out of the charter school movement, and now run a significant proportion of charter schools in that country. Like trusts, they are non-profit. They predominantly operate in low-income neighbourhoods, and often serve non-white ethnic communities (Lake et al, 2010). The impetus for charter schools and CMOs came largely from philanthropists, grassroots organisations and school choice advocates, rather than being set up by government. They typically receive less per-pupil local government funding than district-run schools, though in many cases receive philanthropic top-up funding (Lake et al, 2010). They also are still very much a minority nationally, though CMOs do predominate in certain local systems, such as New Orleans. We have not looked at research on Education Management Organisations (EMOs). These are for-profit and small in number making the research both less relevant but also very limited in quantity.

The Swedish system is probably most different to that in the UK. In Sweden, a change in the law in 1992 instituted public funding for private schools, so-called friskolar. These are frequently run by groups, such as Kunskapsskolan or EIS, which in that respect are similar to trusts. However, a key distinction is that the Swedish system allows for-profit chains, which dominate the system. This significantly changes the incentives within the system (Lundahl et al, 2013). A further distinction is that free schools are required to follow the Swedish national curriculum. Free schools, the majority of which are part of a group, account for around 17% of schools (and more in the non-compulsory upper-secondary sector). There is a notable lack of research on quality factors in these organisations in Sweden, with almost all published research being about systemic impacts on attainment and distribution of pupils.

3. Methodology

This paper provides a broad review of the evidence base. We used literature review methodology rather than more standardised systematic approaches or meta-analyses. This because the evidence base that would conform to the structures required for systematic reviews (let alone meta-analysis) is too limited. Much of the research is also qualitative, and we felt it was important to include this evidence as well.

A search was conducted using several databases, in particular Web of Science, EBSCO, ERIC and google scholar. These databases produced primarily articles from peer-reviewed journals.

In addition, we interrogated the websites of government agencies (e.g. ministries, inspectorates, representative bodies) to uncover non peer-reviewed sources, and conducted a general google search.

We also drew on the references to other studies in those sources.

We used search terms including trust, MAT, CMO, chain, friskolar, stichting, governance, effectiveness, quality and impact.

The volume of papers recovered in this search was relatively limited, which allowed us to individually filter each source for relevance according to the aims of the study.

3.1. How much evidence is there?

There is a relative dearth of evidence on the quality indicators that might define groups of schools working together in a single legal entity across the nations studied.

In the US the charter school movement has had a lot of research interest, but far less is dedicated specifically to CMOs. Much of the US research is also quite ideological in nature, and framed in terms of debates around school choice. Studies on quality factors tend to focus on school boards rather than CMO boards (e.g. Johnson et al, 2010). There are however a number of useful large-scale quantitative studies, albeit generally somewhat older, which does need stressing as the educational landscape is a constantly changing one. The studies by the Mathematica research group are particularly noteworthy.

In the Netherlands, there is similarly little evidence on quality of equivalent of trusts (Stevenson et al, 2021). A lot of the literature is descriptive or prescriptive with limited empirical research, except for the valuable work of Honing and Ehren. There are a number of quality frameworks, but the evidence base behind them is often unclear.

In England quantitative research has primarily concentrated on the overall impact of trusts compared to other structural arrangements, making it less useful for our purposes. The English evidence base does however have a number of qualitative studies on trust characteristics.

Sweden has a particularly weak evidence base in this area. Almost all papers found were either focussed on overall impact on attainment and equity, or very ideological in nature.

3.2. What topics are covered?

There has been an ongoing interest in the impact of trusts on attainment. However, rather than focussing on what makes a trust effective these have more typically looked at comparisons between trusts and local authorities or school districts, and as such are not very illuminating with regards to what makes a trust work well. An example in England is the work of Chapman & Muijs (2014) on federations of schools, which found that being part of an academy group had a significant positive impact on attainment. Internationally, most studies of this type tend to find relatively small effects (Stevenson et al, 2021). This is not surprising, as research tends to show that it those factors closest to the pupil that most strongly affect attainment, and in educational terms that is the teacher and the quality of teaching. This, however, underestimates the extent to which organisations such as trusts can put in place the conditions under which teachers are able to be optimally effective (e.g. Barker & Patten, 2022).

Accountability is a topic explored by in particular Ehren and associates (e.g. Ehren & Perryman, 2018) One recent area of interest has been accountability of trusts, with the argument being made that the system of trusts requires new forms of accountability (Ehren & Perryman, 2018). However, for accountability measures to be valid, there first needs to be an understanding of, and agreement on, what quality in a trust looks like. By definition this is also an area of interest for Ofsted (2019).

Expansions of trusts and CMOs has also been an area of research interest, particularly in England and the US (E.g. Baxter & Floyd, 2019; Farrell et al, 2014), with some research focussing on the 'optimal size' of a trust.

The impact of trusts on quality of education is infrequently studied. Where discussed, it is often deemed a complex matter. A comparative review of the impact of governance conducted by a group of Dutch researchers for example, reports just 22 studies in total, of which far fewer provide empirical data. They attribute this dearth of empirical research to the difficulty of comparing evidence across contexts (Honingh et al, 2017).

Complexity is generally seen as a key reason for the lack of research in this area. It is of course the case that the impact of trusts is likely to be largely indirect, work through a number of different mechanisms, and be contingent on a range of influences within and outside of the schools and the trust itself (Stevenson et al, 20210). Nevertheless, to use this as a reason not to study effectiveness seems a bit of a cop-out. Many aspects of education (and indeed social and organisational sciences more generally) are complex and contextual (for example the impact of classroom practices), but this does not in and of itself negate the possibility and value of empirical comparative research in these areas, as evidenced by the PISA studies for example.

3.3. Quality of the evidence base

Another characteristic of literature in this area is that advice to policy and practice often goes well beyond any evidence presented. In a number of countries documents exist that provide guidance on e.g. quality of governance and leadership in trusts, CMOs and Stichtingen, but in many cases the evidence-base is not clarified (e.g. PO-Raad, 2020).

What research is available is of variable quality. Surveys and quantitative studies provide the strongest evidence linking trust characteristics to quality (e.g. Baude et al, 2014; Furgeson et al, 2012) though it

remains hard to distinguish causality, the outcome measure is limited to test results, and most studies only look at a limited set of factors. Qualitative studies, of which there are especially many in England (e.g. Greany & McGinnity, 2021), provide more in-depth data on how trusts work and what they actually do, but these studies don't establish strong evidence of causality and may in some cases reflect a somewhat limited understanding of the statutory role of trusts within the English education system. An additional problem is that the evidence base for claims is not always sufficiently clearly described.

A further issue is that much of the existing empirical research is based on extending the model of school effectiveness research to trusts (Honingh et al, 2017). This is not in itself a bad idea, but the error that is often made is to simply translate school effectiveness factors upwards to the trust level, thus again misunderstanding the specific role of the trust.

4. Findings

4.1. What is quality?

One of the challenges mentioned in the literature is defining what is meant by quality and effectiveness of a trust (and equivalent). Merely judging on pupil outcomes is problematic, as this does not provide a useful account of the ways in which a trust affects its constituting schools and fails to take account of the importance of quality factors at pupil, teacher, school and trust level.

Ehren and Perryman (2018), drawing on Popp (2013) distinguish four key areas of impact that trusts can have:

- On the individual (e.g. impact on teaching and learning, support from the centre for teaching and learning)
- On the school as organisation (e.g. support from the centre for school improvement)
- On the trust as a network (e.g. back office, relationship strength, development of parental involvement)
- On the community (e.g. improved employment prospects or social cohesion).

Similarly, in looking at effective governance in boards, the Dutch PO-raad (advisory board for primary schools) distinguishes impacts in three main areas: quality of education, HR, and business processes (PO-Raad, 2014).

In their quality framework for charter school support organisations the US body Building Charter School Quality (2009) put forward the following elements: financial performance & sustainability, board performance & stewardship and parent & community engagement. Interestingly, quality of education doesn't feature in their list.

In their discussion paper CST (2022) defined five domains of effective trusts: quality of education, expert governance, workforce resilience and wellbeing, efficiency and effectiveness, and public benefit and civic duty.

Clearly there are similarities to the dimensions described in the Dutch and US frameworks above, though these can obviously occur at multiple levels (for example quality of education can be enhanced at the school as well as individual level and may be more or less a network effect depending on the working model of the trust). Therefore, from an English perspective, we maintain the five CST dimensions as indicators of quality and will discuss the evidence for each in turn.

4.2. Quality of education

The largest volume of research on trust quality relates (broadly) to quality of education. However, as mentioned above, most research in this area has looked at impact on attainment in quite a limited way, rather than focussing specifically on what trusts can do to improve quality of education.

There are a few US studies which have correlated student test scores with characteristics of CMOs.

Kelly et al (2020) studied a range of CMOs and local districts in the US. They found three main drivers for improvement:

- Improving the quality of teaching. Hiring decisions are seen to play a role here, but also investment in high quality CPD and an aligned curriculum
- Allowing school leaders to exercise instructional leadership, not least by matching resources to goals. The authors also recommend some linking of reward to performance.
- Driving culture through a shared vision and goals.

Also in the US, Furgeson et al (2011) matched their sample to comparator schools and found a positive but small impact of being a secondary school in a CMO (there was no test data for primaries). They found two main factors that were related to a positive impact of the CMO on test scores:

- Comprehensive behaviour policies, including clear behaviour standards, zero tolerance for dangerous behaviour, codes with rewards and sanctions, and signed agreements with parents; and
- Intensive coaching of teachers, provision of CPD and feedback.

With respect to these interesting US studies, it is important to remember the significant differences in context compared to the English system, which has in part influenced the selection of variables looked at in these studies.

These findings are similar to those reported by the Dutch Inspectorate in their study of success factors in trusts (interviews conducted with leaders) (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2020).

Based on his work with trusts, Hopkins (2017) states that trusts need to focus on capacity building for school improvement. A systematised approach across the trust is recommended. The extent to which trusts need to systematise and standardise processes is, however, a disputed one, with few clear answers from the literature. Hill (2016), for example, states that trusts need to allow adaptation to context in their schools, while applying a number of non-negotiables, especially in areas such as finance and HR systems. In Sweden, there is a tendency towards some elements of standardisation to support the brand of the organisation within the educational marketplace, also often seen when these organisations expand abroad (Ronnberg et al, 2022). In the Netherlands, by contrast, there tends to be little standardisation and a lot of autonomy for schools within a trust-equivalent. In England, Ofsted (2019) reported significant variance in the extent to which trusts directed policies and practices in areas such as teaching and learning and curriculum. In the US too, there is significant variance, though the extent to which CMOs prescribe curriculum and teaching is on average somewhat greater than in England (Lake et al, 2010).

An academic emphasis or an emphasis on teaching and learning are often mentioned as elements trusts need to focus on, though it is less clear how they will do so. Hopkins (2017) suggests a focus on five areas: curriculum, assessment/accountability, teaching, learning and leadership. This does, however, leave a lot of questions as to how a trust approaches this in practice.

Furgeson et al (2011) identified three main approaches to improvement in the CMOs they studied:

- Data-driven, with a strong emphasis on the use of formative data and performance-related pay;
- Time-on-task driven, with an emphasis on school discipline and increasing instructional time; and
- Incremental, where a more gradual approach to innovation was taken.

The evidence suggested that the data-driven and time-on-task approach were more impactful than the others. Factors relating to a time-on-task driven approach, such as behaviour policies, were more likely to be significantly related to attainment than factors relating to the data-driven approach. Use of formative assessment was also positively related to outcomes. Performance-related pay and more assessment of pupils were not significant.

A follow-up study showed that CMOs which scored particularly strongly on behaviour policies focussed on developing detailed and coherent programmes to promote development of social norms and behaviours, encouraged consistency across classrooms, ensured adults modelled desired behaviours, and encouraged parental support for behaviour norms, for example through home-school contracts. In terms of teacher coaching, the strongest CMOs employed coaching that strategically targeted teacher needs but aligned these to school and CMO goals, frequently monitored and observed new teachers, provided rapid feedback on teacher observations, selected expert coaches, and ensured that school policies supported coaching (Lake et al, 2012).

One area of focus in the literature is the role of the trust in quality assurance (QA). Ofsted (2019) reported that trusts in their study played an important role in QA, though the extent of their specific involvement in QA on quality of education varied. Furgeson et al (2011) found that frequent observation of teachers was linked to greater coherence in approaches in CMOs. The extent to which these different approaches were related to differences in quality of education, or indeed outcomes, are not clear, however. In the Netherlands the inspectorate stated that schools in which QA is delegated too much to schools perform less well, in particular on pupil support (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2020). A challenge for trusts in QA is avoiding an approach that becomes overly bureaucratic (Lake et al, 2010).

What we know from a range of research is that leadership at the school level is key to educational quality. It would therefore seem imperative that effective leadership at the trust level provides, through support and accountability, the conditions under which school leaders can thrive. In that sense it is important than boards recognise the expertise within trust schools and draw on this to improve and learn (Stevenson et al, 2021).

4.3. Expert governance

The importance of governance and accountability come back as themes across the countries studied. The quality and experience of trustees are the most frequently studied quality factors in this regard.

Good governance is seen as key to ensuring quality, and thus to reducing poor performance across a trust. Crawfurd & Hares (2021) find some evidence that the variance in pupil outcomes is reduced in groups of schools in a legal entity compared to standalone schools, though this evidence is limited to

relatively smaller groups in England and Pakistan. Similarly, Baude et al (2014) find that variance in quality between charter schools in Texas reduced over time as the better CMOs came to dominate the sector. Less variance is not universally seen as an indicator of quality, however. Peeters et al (2013) argue that we don't sufficiently understand what variance means in the context of trusts, and that valuing choice means valuing variance. However, valuing variance in the *system* does not necessarily imply that variance within *trusts* themselves is always desirable. Choice can involve variance between trusts, but (and this could be important from the point of view of parents making choices), reliable homogeneity within.

As part of quality of governance there has been research into the experience and skills of governors and trustees, with expertise seen as necessary in a range of areas including educational quality, finance, legal and HR (PO-Raad, 2020; Finch et al, 2016; Kettlewell et al, 2020). In an interesting MBA dissertation on why Multi Academy Trusts fail, based on interviews with CEOs, Evans (2020) finds that behaviour, skills and motivation of trustees and board members was the key factor in determining the success or failure of trusts. In some less successful trusts, trustees did not fully understand their role in holding the CEO to account. The skills and motivation of the CEO her or himself were also central to success, with not all CEOs having made the transition from previous roles as heads successfully. The importance of challenge and support from the trust was also emphasised by school leaders interviewed by Ofsted (2019), who like Evans found that not all governors and trustees fully understood the role and goals of the trust. Kettlewell et al (2020) report a mismatch between the skills CEOs thought trustees had, and those they reported themselves, especially with respect to knowledge of education.

Other characteristics of boards and trusts have also been studied. A study in the Netherlands looked at a range of factors in 131 boards which run 658 schools (Honingh et al, 2018). They measured self-perceived efficacy of the board (i.e. do board members feel qualified to contribute to educational quality), the extent to which the supervisory board was seen as an effective counterweight to the executive board, number of board members and number of schools in the trust. Results showed that the executive board acting as a counterweight was the only significant factor influencing pupil outcomes. There is further Dutch research showing a link between better inspection results and a better understanding of what is happening in schools (monitoring), and the Dutch inspectorate has also reported that boards better able to manage quality of school leadership get improved outcomes (Honingh et al, 2017). The Dutch inspectorate has also stressed the importance of boards being open to feedback and disagreement (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2020). Monitoring the performance of schools through use of data is seen as central to accountability within CMOs in the US (Kelly et al, 2015), and is also an element mentioned by Hill (2016) in his commentary on school improvement in multi-academy trusts, by Ofsted (2019), and by the Dutch PO-Raad (2014) in their guidance. Conversely, lack of a good use of data was a factor in the failure of trusts in Evans' (2020) study in England. According to Kettlewell et al (2020), there is a risk that boards can become too inward-looking and insular if they are not themselves subject to effective monitoring and evaluation. They suggest external input may be helpful to this process.

All these findings suggest that internal accountability, the extent to which the trust holds itself accountable, is a potentially important factor in ensuring trust quality (Honingh et al, 2018).

In their study of CMOs and local districts that had successfully improved their schools, Kelly et al (2020) point to unified governance and a clear vision that aligns school practice as prime elements of successful CMOs. Similarly, in their study of stichtingen in the Netherlands, Hooge et al (2015) find a shared vision and coherence of governance and policy to be among the main factors identified by trust and school leaders in effective trusts. This in turn leads to collective responsibility and collaboration across the trust. In Greany's (2018) case studies of trusts he found a clear vision, underpinned by shared values and culture, to be a key element of effective trusts. In those trusts staff knew and were able to articulate the vision of the trust. This in turn helped to develop shared values. Extensive communication helped staff to know and understand the vision.

Research in England has looked at the strategic role of trustees. Baxter (2017), using case study research, points to the key role of strategy, but also to some confusion about what is actually meant by this at the trust level. Trustees tend to leave key aspects of strategy such as horizon scanning primarily to the trust CEO (Baxter & John, 2021).

The literature in this area also provides some theoretical frameworks to look at governance structures. Baxter (2017), for example, uses Giddens' structuration theory to illuminate the different levels of power and decision making within trusts, while Scheerens (2016) focuses on Quinn & Rohrbach's (1983) well established competing-values framework as a way of looking at governance within education systems.

Network governance is also a theme that occurs in some of the literature. The use of networks to improve performance is something we are also seeing in other parts of the public sector, though the exact forms tend to depend strongly on the policy environment, partners etc. (Farrell et el, 2012). In particular, within trusts, there is an emphasis on how schools can support one another to improve within a network. This is seen as one of the most potent ways in which trusts can lead to systemic improvement, but a number of conditions need to be met within the trust for this to be effective. The role of the trust was also found to be crucial to improving 'stuck' schools in a recent study by Ofsted (2020). Trusts in that study were best able to support improvement through their combination of in-depth knowledge of their schools, which allowed them to make accurate diagnoses and provide tailored support, and ability to draw on internal strength to provide high quality CPD. They were also instrumental in raising expectations. To do this effectively does of course require sufficient internal capacity in the trust, both in terms of leadership and expertise on, for example, teaching or curriculum.

Overall, the importance of expert governance is widely acknowledged. There is, however, less evidence on what exactly is meant by this. Education, finance, HR, strategy development and legal expertise are all mentioned, reflecting the broad role of trustees in many contexts. Expert governance also means strong internal accountability within the trust, not least trustees holding CEOs to account. A strong vision, that is shared across the trust, leads to aligned and effective practice in schools. Exploiting the opportunities of the trust network to enable schools to support one another is a major advantage of the trust structure.

4.4. Workforce resilience and wellbeing

Workforce resilience and wellbeing have not been as frequently studied at the trust level. There are very few studies that look directly at policies in this area, notwithstanding common recruitment and retention issues across the included countries.

An aspect of the work of trusts that does reappear in the evidence base are relations between trustees and trust leaders. Social capital across the stichting, and among board members, was found to be a key feature of effective trusts in Honingh et al's (2017) review. US research shows similar patterns, with good relationships between CEO and school leaders being a key element in effective CMOs. Internal human capital is also a major driver of the capacity of CMOs to grow and expand (Farrell et al, 2014).

There is some evidence from Furgeson et al's (2011) study of CMOs that principals spent less time on administration and more on instructional leadership than those in comparison schools, while Greany (2018) reports school leaders saying that high quality back-office support freed up time for headteachers to dedicate to educational leadership.

An important element of workforce resilience and well-being is opportunity for professional development. The role of the trust in facilitating this was seen as a major advantage by leaders interviewed by Ofsted (2019) in their study on multi-academy trusts. Greany (2018) reported that most school leaders in his study reported that professional development was strong in their trusts and that most trusts offered staff significant Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities. Similarly, the Dutch inspectorate reported on the importance of trusts supporting schools to become learning organisations and to empower leaders in schools (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2020). In the US, Furgeson et al (2011) found staff turnover to be lower where the CMO provided central CPD. While there is limited evidence on the impact of school boards, the impact of school leaders has been demonstrated, so creating the conditions under which school leaders can be optimally effective would appear to be a key task of the trust (just as creating the conditions under which teachers can be effective is a key role of school leaders) (Stevenson et al, 2021). The role of CPD is clearly central to this task.

DeArmond et al (2012) recommend that CMOs recruit principals for fit with the values, goals and approaches of the CMO, provide intensive and ongoing socialisation on the job, not least through sharing information between schools, and align pay and promotion opportunities with CMO goals.

An advantage of the trust structure is the flexibility it can allow in managing the workforce across trust schools. In this regard, Worth (2017) reports on data demonstrating that movement between schools within a trust is significantly larger than that between non-trust schools at similar distances, but also that within trusts teachers are more likely to move from a school with a more advantaged intake to a school with a more disadvantaged intake, which is the opposite of the typical pattern of teacher mobility. This suggests that trusts are pro-actively managing staff to support schools in greatest need.

4.5. Effectiveness and efficiency

There are few comparisons of trusts along the lines of those between schools which have informed the school effectiveness knowledge base. Of course, some evidence may be drawn from school effectiveness research. While very little school effectiveness research has focussed on levels between the school and national policy (with the exception of a few studies on local authorities and Chapman & Muijs' (2012) work on federations) there are some lessons from research at the school level that may be inform trusts in thinking about the conditions they need to encourage. Key factors from school effectiveness research include:

- Effective leadership
- A clear focus
- A disciplined and orderly school climate
- High expectations
- A focus on effective teaching and learning
- Monitoring progress through effective use of data
- Parental involvement
- CPD (Scheerens, 2016)

Collaboration is frequently seen as a key lever for school improvement, and one that trusts are perfectly placed to use. Being able to collaborate as part of a network of schools is seen by many school leaders as one of the main benefits of being part of a trust, though the extent to which these opportunities are fully utilised differs (Salokangas & Chapman, 2014). Getting schools to work together well is also seen as beneficial by Hill (2016), and by leaders interviewed by Ofsted (2019), though conditions need to be in place to ensure that this is done effectively (Muijs et al, 2011). This means ensuring that there is sufficient capacity within the trust to do this, that collaboration is based on clear goals and desired outcomes, and that a culture of trust prevails.

While there are some studies of aspects of effectiveness in trusts, efficiency has rarely been studied, except for some aspects of efficiency in US CMOs.

In developing countries, Crawfurd & Hares (2021) posit that back office centralisation in groups of schools is likely to lead to greater efficiency, though evidence in these contexts is lacking at present. Back-office support and economies of scale were cited as key benefits of trusts by school leaders in Ofsted's (2019) study. Earlier research found little relationship between amount of top-slice and services delivered (Finch et al, 2016), but little contemporary evidence exists in the UK. In the US, Lake et al (2010) did report lower per-pupil costs in CMOs compared to district-run schools for equal or better outcomes. However, the financing mechanisms are very different to the English context.

Linking decisions on HR and finance to strategy, for example by allocating resources to strategic priorities, is related to trust effectiveness, according to the Dutch inspectorate (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2020).

4.6. Public benefit and civic duty

Involvement with the community is seen as a key part of the civic role of trusts and is one that is particularly stressed in the Dutch literature, for example in Honingh et al's (2017) review of effective practice in board governance. A code of practice drawn up for Dutch primary boards specifically mentions the need to look beyond the trust and to the national interest (PO Raad, 2014). Good links with the local community and a pro-active orientation to working with stakeholders were reported by the Dutch inspectorate as characteristics of effective trust boards (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2020).

A moral imperative to provide pupils with the best possible education was a major driver for trusts according to trust and school leaders interviewed for Ofsted's (2019) study. Locally based trusts saw their role as providing more continuous joined up provision in their locality. By contrast, a loss of focus on moral purpose was sometimes evident in failing trusts in Evans' (2020) study, especially where a focus on growth became all encompassing.

Learning from other schools outside the trust is mentioned as a characteristic of high performing trusts by Hill (2016) and Kelly et al (2020). The latter also stress that the successful CMOs they studied created strong links with external stakeholders. This is also the case for networks more generally, where there is clear evidence of the need to remain open to external stakeholders and influences to avoid becoming overly internally focussed (Muijs et al, 2014).

There is some evidence from Sweden that where that public commitment may be lessened due to the structure of the system, this leads to a focus on extraneous factors that don't necessarily improve education.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we looked at the evidence on factors that enhance trust quality in England and three countries with relatively comparable systems, the Netherlands, the US and Sweden.

While the volume of high quality research is not extensive, there are nevertheless some key conclusions we can draw from this evidence base.

1. There is overall support for the five dimensions of quality developed by CST: *quality of education, expert governance, workforce resilience and wellbeing, efficiency and effectiveness,* and *public benefit and civic duty*, albeit that the evidence is fat stronger in the first three of these than in the latter two.

2. The role of *trustees* is central to strong trusts. This entails effective *oversight and accountability,* and requires a strong and broad skills base within boards, encompassing at least educational knowledge, finance, HR and legal.

3. As well as oversight and accountability, a key role of the trust is to *provide support and professional development* to their schools. This means fostering collaboration and mutual learning, and drawing on internal strength to develop high quality CPD.

4. Quality of education is fostered by an emphasis on improving the *quality of teaching* and giving school leaders the tools and space to exercise *instructional leadership*.

5. Civic duty is an imperative for trusts. Failing trusts are less likely to show *moral purpose*.

There are notable omissions in the literature. Curriculum, for example, is barely discussed, and the same is true for staff wellbeing. This points to the overall weakness of the evidence base. The focus of much of the research to date has been on comparison of trusts with other system structures, expansion of trusts (particularly in the US), and ideological position papers. It is high time the research community move beyond this limited focus and start producing more actionable findings that can help all trusts improve.

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