

Research Note

Inside the Black Box: School Business Management in a Multi-Academy Trust in England

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Abstract: Since the 1980s, it has been argued that schools can become more effective and efficient by learning from and implementing private sector business management practices. The New Public Management reform movement has, however, been critiqued, including on the grounds that it concerns a wider reculturing of schools, in which the purposes and values of education are reshaped along the lines of business. With this contested context, the present study explores the development of school business management within a case study Multi-Academy Trust. The empirical research on school business management has predominantly been undertaken from a school improvement perspective, which has been concerned particularly with describing what school business managers do. However, little empirical research has been concerned with critically analysing why school business managers do what they do and, in particular, what aims and values guide their practices and how these, in turn, influence the outcomes they work towards.

Introduction

Background and context

Since 1979, the English state school system has been bombarded with a series of education reforms that emphasise neo-liberal ideologies (West, 2014). More specifically, the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) brought about seismic changes in education (Hall, 2013), leading to momentous restructuring and re-culturing of schools (Woods *et al.*, 2013). At the heart of the neoliberal reforms brought by ERA, has been the development of educational quasi-markets (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993). Operating within a quasi-market context, schools have been encouraged to “become more like business and more business-like” (Ball, 1999:198). The encouragement for schools to adopt business practices has been well recognised. Since the introduction of New Public Management in UK education, it has been argued that there has been substantive change of not just the practices in schools, but also of the aims and values that schools work with and towards, what Charlotte Woods *et al.* (2013) have recently recognised as a process of ‘reculturation’. Within this reculturation of schools that the neoliberal reform has encouraged, schools adopt certain business practices.

Within this context, the present research seeks to develop two interrelated objectives. The first objective is to understand the practices in a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT); how School Business Management is (re)developed, particularly as it is enacted in multi-academy structures. The second objective is to critically interpret those practices and their effects and analyse whether this process further leads to corporatisation. To adequately address the aim of the study, it will be necessary to empirically determine and understand what the School Business Management team is doing, what its aims, beliefs and values are and how its work succeeds in supporting the MAT, carry out its educational functions and/or manage the MAT towards further becoming a corporation. The focus will be on three business functions: *finance*, because it is inextricably linked to a school’s overall strategy; *Human Resources* (HR), because it relates to people (it is about competing for scarce resources, as teachers are); and *marketing*, because schools seek to build a strong institutional brand to attract students.

Finance here not only means how money is distributed (spent/raised), but also what the purpose and values that sit behind finance are and what kinds of practices, aims and impacts they create. School HR is not about a preoccupation with 'how to' manage people (Seezink and Poell, 2011), but is about understanding what the purpose and values that sit behind HR are and what kinds of practices, aims and impacts they create, an aspect of HR we know little of. Finally, marketing here refers not only to the promotional efforts to attract parents and students (see Jabbar, 2016), but also what the purposes and values that sit behind marketing are and what kinds of practices, aims and impacts they create. It also includes branding as the building of a strong image and identity, which can constitute a management and leadership practice with the potential to shape meanings, values and practices within the organization (Naidoo et al., 2014).

In the context of working in a MAT environment, what are the aims and values that School Business Managers along with headteachers come with, when they think about and manage finance, HR and marketing? Is School Business Management in a MAT leading further to processes of corporatisation? In terms of finance, is there enough flexibility in the budget, particularly when considering that a MAT can take off certain percent (the top-slice, known as general annual grant) of each school's revenue to fund the MAT's operational costs (Finch et al., 2016)? Does HR in a MAT try to maximise the productivity of its staff and if so, how do people respond to it? In terms of marketing, how do the School Business Manager's and headteachers' beliefs and values influence the purpose of marketing and how does a MAT brand itself; how do the staff respond and contribute to branding activity and with what effect?

The present research centres around one principal question, followed by three sub-questions:

Principal question:

How do the school business management practices in a Multi-Academy Trust work out in practice, do these practices further lead to corporatisation and if so, how, to what extent and with what effect?

Sub-questions:

- a) What is the school business management team doing empirically in terms of the three key functions relating to finance, HR and marketing? How are these organized and managed?
- b) What are the aims and values of the senior leadership team that guide its practices in relation to finance, HR and marketing? Do they have the mindset that their role and purpose is to enhance teaching and learning?
- c) What are the contributions of finance, HR and marketing practices and how do these three key functions impact the Multi-Academy Trust, according to the senior leadership team?

Methodology

Research design and methods

The study will adopt the epistemological and theoretical perspectives of social constructivism and interpretivism respectively, informed by Crotty's (1998) work. The ethnographic case study will be chosen as the most appropriate research design, based on the aim of the present study, which is to answer 'what' and 'how' questions and capture in-depth information to enable the analysis of complex issues. Different data collection tools will be used to answer the research questions: semi-structured face-to-face (and possibly online) interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis. The British Educational Research Association (2011) ethical guidelines will be followed throughout this study.

Selection of cases

A single case-study of a MAT will be chosen in order to explore a research area where both theory and empirical study is at an early stage and where the phenomena could be examined directly in a real-world context and could inform professional practice (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). MATs are a sensible target for research as these are regarded by the Government as the leading-edge schools, but most importantly, they are regarded as a new way of reform towards the corporatisation of education.

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