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# **‘System leader’ consultancy development in English schools:- a long term agenda for a democratic future?**

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## **Abstract**

*Within the policy rationale of a ‘self-improving’ school system, there are now several thousand National College designated ‘system leaders’ working as consultants in English schools on aspects of school to school support. So far, there has been no systematic consideration of the long term development of these consultants in ways that are consonant with values and concerns of education professionals. This article addresses this challenge by presenting an agenda for consultancy development in English schools which will also have wider relevance for the international community. Six areas of enquiry and propositions for action are identified and the principles and practicalities of implementing them in a school led system examined. Conclusions are drawn about the importance of being proactive in setting a long-term agenda for ‘system leader’ consultancy development in schools that is historically grounded in democratic process and notions of public value.*

**Key words**      *Consultancy development   organization development   system leadership*

## **Introduction**

*The market, with its great strengths, is not the appropriate mechanism to supply services that should be distributed equally to people in every neighbourhood in every city and town in the nation, without regard to their ability to pay or their political power, (Ravitch, 2010)*

In 2010 The English government white paper, ‘The Importance of Teaching,’ set out four criteria for its vision of a so - called ‘self-improving’ school system. In such a system teachers and schools would be responsible for their own improvement. They would learn from each other and from research so that effective practice spread. The best schools and leaders would extend their reach across other schools so that all schools improved and government intervention or support would be minimised. (DFE, 2010). ‘Extending reach’ across other schools meant, in effect, system leadership, and Hargreaves , in a series of thinkpieces, (NCTL 2014) characterised system leadership as a task imbued with moral purpose within a collaborative culture that would drive curriculum innovation, drawing from aspects of the Chinese and Finnish education systems to support his case.

Reflecting the minimisation of government intervention and support in the white paper, system leadership is mutually dependent on devolved administrative school structures, and a key organising framework for system leadership in the English schools’ landscape is the Teaching Schools Alliance. Teaching Schools Alliances are defined and justified by the National College for Teaching and Leadership as... *...groups of schools led by one or more teaching schools (designated ‘outstanding’ in inspection) that are benefiting from school to school support as well as strategic partners who lead some aspects of training and development. They are part of the government’s plan to give schools a central role in raising standards by developing a self-improving and sustainable school system (NCTL, 2014).* Each Teaching School Alliance has six core areas of responsibility that include Initial Teacher Training, teacher CPD, school to school support, leadership development, Specialist Leaders of Education (the newest tranche of system leaders tasked with working as consultants with middle

leaders and staff in school experiencing significant difficulties) and Research and Development. Small amounts of seed corn funding of up to £25k (NCTL 2015) are provided by the National College for school to school support.

Within the rationale of a school-led system, Teaching School Alliances are therefore taking over school improvement services previously provided by Local Authorities. Yet, as Simkins et al, (2015) observe, unlike geographic community - based Local Authorities, the definition of 'the system' they serve is more dispersed and 'multiply determined: structurally, by the bureaucratic, financial and statutory constitutions of the organisations and /or individual role of a system leader; pragmatically, by the formal and informal legitimacy and prestige (and therefore influence) held by the organisation or person; and normatively by the values (personal and professional) that the system leaders seek to manifest in their work. ( eg we will only work with a school that supports a particular pedagogy)'. p.16. The demise of Local Authorities, and the fact that Teaching School Alliances can see themselves in market competition with each other for the provision of services to fund their core activities, also raises questions about the nature of future coordinating bodies above the level of school groups that will ensure quality and equity in school improvement within national frameworks of accountability through targets and inspection across the wider system. This problematic definition of 'the system' also means that the question of whether teaching schools, system leaders and strategic partners can achieve 'knowledge mobilisation' (Campbell, 2011) of educational practice across the wider school system, which Husbands (2015) sees as their ultimate purpose, will be a subject of continuing debate.

Greany, (2014), agreed that Hargreaves' policy narrative of a 'system leadership approach' had the potential to galvanise the energy and commitment of teachers and meet all four criteria for a self-improving school system to make it work. But he also recognised the problems of quality, equity and accountability in a 'self-improving' system. The trouble was that three other government 'reform' narratives, those of punitive accountability, laissez-faire autonomy and market values were competing with and providing tensions and contradictions around such an approach. The government needed to clarify its approach to a self-improving system by addressing the tensions within these four competing policy narratives. This article contributes to this endeavour of clarifying 'a system leadership approach' for those working beyond their schools in a variety of roles on aspects of school to school support. It does so by articulating a future professional development agenda, in terms of ethical values, and political as well as professional skills and understandings that system leaders need to engage with in order to challenge the three competing narratives and become effective agents of school improvement.

Greany acknowledged that two models of system leadership were needed in a self-improving system, an intervention model to address weak performance in a subset of schools and a voluntary partnership model to build capacity and improve teaching and learning in all schools. The intervention model is most likely to be found in federations and academy chains, the voluntary partnership model in the growing number of Teaching School Alliances. While the boundary between these two models is permeable and both models will be considered in my agenda for system leader development, my emphasis will be on the voluntary partnership model. This is because, although such a model may have to weather the 'vulnerable' nature of school collaboration, (Wheatley and Stone, 2013) it has potential to apply to all, not just a subset, of schools and is of increasing significance now that 600 Teaching School Alliances and over 9000 system leaders of all designations are predicted for English schools in 2016 by the National College for Teaching and Leadership. (NCTL, 2015).

The notion of 'system leaders' habitually working beyond their schools on school to school support is a significant policy shift and now has a 10 year history of research and practice in England. The success of Heads working as 'consultant leaders' to struggling schools in the London Challenge

initiative (Earley and Weindling, 2006) is commonly attributed to have begun this shift and led to National College designation and recruitment of a variety of system leader roles. These roles included National Leaders of Education and their 'support schools' from 2006, followed by Local Leaders of Education (peer coaching heads), Local Leaders of Governance and, from 2010, Specialist Leaders of Education, working with middle leaders on curriculum and leadership issues. Meanwhile, a series of reviews and impact studies from the research community (Higham et al, 2009) the National College (Hill and Matthews, 2010) and practitioners (Robinson, 2012) has served to strengthen the case for a system leadership approach to school improvement.

Given that system leadership is essentially a consultancy task, a noticeable absence from this research is the use of consultancy literature to inform and reflect on practice. For example, Earley and Weindling's interviews with consultant leaders in London Challenge uncovered issues of role clarity and ethical dilemmas in their work but without any conceptualisation from the consultancy literature could not take learning from these issues and dilemmas any further. Likewise, Higham et al, saw 'coaching' and 'facilitation' as taken for granted activities of system leaders rather than consultancy tasks that could be interpreted in a number of ways. Even the National College's recruitment of several thousand system leaders, of all designations, does not see the need yet for consultancy literature in its research reports to invite critical reflection on data gathered around brokerage, contracting and commissioning processes in the consulting cycle (NCSL, 2013). Only recently has consultancy literature begun to be used to explore issues that could have both immediate and long term relevance for system leaders, whether it be modelling contracting relationships with school systems from the viewpoint of consulting organisations (Hazle Bussey et al , 2014, Mohammed et al, 2015) or advancing public policy debates about consultancy and knowledge production (Gunter et al, 2015).

The demise of local authorities and other publicly funded agencies offering support and advice to schools means that much consultancy work is now done privately. At individual/associate level ex school/ local authority/ agency staff now offer contracted services on a billable basis. In a recent British Academy study of such work, Gunter, (2014), gathered perceptions of such staff who had moved from being paid and qualified 'public' employees to commissioning and contracting private individuals and companies. Her data raised questions about whether public sector values could be promoted and developed through private sector location, and whether a professional career as a consultant would be possible or desirable once the current generation of previous school/local authority people had retired. Another study of larger private sector and corporate consultancies, (Gunter et al , 2015) questioned whether those who had entered the field of education services had values, interests and knowledge claims that were in tune with professional ethics and research practice.

This study, then, has a twin purpose that mirrors the twin roles and concerns of system leaders. System leaders not only have to think about their own consultancy development for school to school support. They also have to broker and engage strategic partners, which means developing understandings of and positions in the wider field of external consultancy services. So, drawing on both recent and seminal consultancy research, it looks both inwards at the development needs of system leaders as consultants in their school groups and outwards to system leader relationships with consultancy organisations outside those groups. Reflecting the four narratives of system reform, the 'problem' of consultancy it addresses within a system leadership approach, is formulating a politically astute and ethically aware practice response to narrow market values. Gunter's (2014) concern about the future generation of consultants is encapsulated in my research question. This asks that, if, as a professional community, we believe that education should be a

public service in a democratic society, what sort of system leader consultants do we want in the future? The contribution of this paper in addressing this question is a series of propositions for system leader development that, taken together, broaden the scope of what has been presented in research to date. The prime focus of the consultancy development agenda to be introduced is system leaders formally designated by the English National College for Teaching and Leadership. However, It will also have relevance for well -positioned headteachers ‘appropriating’ and local authority officers being ‘facilitated’ into these roles in the English system (Simkins et al , 2015) and for all education professionals working in educational consultancy roles overseas in policy backgrounds of decentralised administrative structures and high stakes accountability.

### **A Consultancy Development Agenda**

All agendas need terms of reference and the starting points for this agenda are definitions of system leadership and consultancy from relevant research . I first give overarching practice definitions of both and then point up values, skills and understandings of consultants which will form my areas of professional development enquiry.

*‘System leaders’ are assigned to work with underperforming schools in a variety of consultancy roles to build leadership capacity, help leadership of and in these schools, improve teaching and learning, and ultimately raise student achievement (Higham et al, 2009). System leadership is imbued with moral purpose and all teachers, not just senior leaders, have the potential to be system leaders. (Boylan, 2013).*

*‘System leader’ consultants are skilled as ‘professional helpers’. They build levels of mutual acceptance with clients, through ever changing combinations of ‘expert’, ‘diagnostician’ and ‘process’ roles that depend on task, client expectations and organisational context. (Schein, 2002). System leader consultants are committed to democratic values (Burnes and Cooke, 2012). They base their diagnoses of client situations on policy appropriate organisational analysis, (Woods and Simkins, 2014) and understand relationships between agency and structure in the work they do (Hadfield and Jopling, 2012). Consultancy work arising from their analyses is politically astute and ethically aware (Close, 2013). It acknowledges the complexity of contracting relationships (Hazel Bussey et al, 2014) and of change processes. (Puusa et al, 2013) and takes a critical stance in public policy debate around consultancy and knowledge production. (Gunter et al, 2015).*

From these definitions, an agenda emerges of six interrelated areas of enquiry. Three of these areas, ‘Values’, ‘Analysis’ and ‘Change’ are theories of understanding which I call ‘contextual dimensions,’ and which are drawn from the democratic traditions of the Organisation Development literature, reviewed in Burnes and Cooke (2012). The remaining three areas, ‘Political coaching’, ‘Organisational Contracting’ and ‘Knowledge Production’ are theories of action, which I call ‘operating levels’. These describe consultancy practice at micro, meso and macro levels and use as a framing device the conceptualisation of consultancy as ‘critical’, ‘functional’ and ‘socially critical’ from a review of consultancy literature across the social sciences by Gunter et al, (2014). These areas of enquiry can also be expressed as ‘propositions for action’. Each proposition is a starting point for justifying the inclusion of a particular area of enquiry in the professional development agenda and tracks the direction of my argument.

So, briefly, the contextual dimensions of consultancy development start within the democratic values tradition of the Organisation Development Literature. They draw from a variety of research literatures for organisational analysis and find the concepts of sensemaking, identity formation and loosely coupled systems particularly relevant for understanding change in the new policy landscape. At the ‘micro’ operating level of one to one client/ consultant relationships, what I’ve called ‘political

coaching’ is important for learning how to exert influence with clients, while at the meso organisational level, new models of contracting relationships between consulting and school system organisations are useful for engaging strategic partners. Finally, beyond personal involvement in school to school support, system leader consultants’ involvement in brokering external consultancy services would benefit from understandings at the macro level of wider public policy debates around consultancy and knowledge production that are appropriate to their role and function. Drawn together, the central proposition of this paper is that is the effective exercise of system leadership depends on certain understandings and proficiencies about which there is a fair amount of knowledge from the field of consultancy and that more attention to this literature will provide an intellectual foundation for what is required to develop principled and long - term helping relationships in a self - improving school system.

In addition to recent research, this review paper has been informed by practice and reflection on a series of consultancy roles over my career. Practice has included Local Authority Advisory Teacher (Close, 1990, 1996), Researcher/Consultant in Organisation Development (Close 1996b, Johnson et al, 2001) and Director of an Organisation Development Company specialising in multi agency working in public services (Close, 2003,2012). The ‘operating levels’ and school - appropriate updates on ‘analysis’ and ‘change’. draw primarily on research and practice since 2005, with my notion of ‘political coaching’ deriving from the supervision of masters dissertations on leadership coaching between 2010 and 2012. (Close,2013). Table 1 below provides a snapshot of my developmental agenda.

*Table 1: A consultancy development agenda: areas of enquiry and propositions for action (Close, 2016)*

<b>Contextual Dimensions</b>	<b>Propositions for action, that...</b>
Values	1...consultancy development is located within the democratic tradition of the Organisation Development literature. (Burnes and Cooke, 2012)
Analysis	2...consultancy development is grounded in organisational analysis that draws from research on established literatures of ‘organisation’ (Close and Raynor, 2010),structural reform (Woods and Simkins, 2014) and network theory (Hadfield and Jopling, 2012)
Change	3...consultancy development draws on change theories around sensemaking (Weick et al,2005.) identity formation (Puusa et al, 2013) and loosely coupled systems, (Burke 2014)
<b>Operating Levels</b>	
Micro	4...consultancy development requires ‘political coaching (Close, 2013)
Meso	5...consultancy development is informed by new models of inter - organisational contracting (Hazle Bussey et al 2014)
Macro	6...consultancy development includes reaching positions in public policy debate around ‘consultocracy’ and knowledge production (Gunter et al, 2015)

This developmental agenda is broader in scope, in terms of levels and dimensions of consultancy work, than anything attempted in the educational leadership field thus far. This breadth of scope means that the arguments, rather than detailed expositions, will be necessarily condensed into literature signposts and conceptual frameworks intended for you, reader, as springboards for further enquiry and the design of professional development activity. In the remainder of the paper, I first ground each proposition for action in consultancy practice under examination by individual and mixed groups of system leaders. I then present arguments for their inclusion into a consultancy development agenda. The frameworks are then brought together into an overarching model of consultancy development for a subsequent discussion of their implementation as professional development provision for system leaders in a school- led system.

**Proposition 1:- Consultancy development and values**

David , a Specialist Leader of Education, is reflecting on a deployment to help a struggling Science Department with a range of performance issues. He has read Schein’s seminal ‘Process Consultation Revisited’ (Schein, 1999) and is considering how the interrelated roles of ‘expert’, ‘diagnostician’ and ‘process helper’ have worked for him over different stages of the deployment in building ‘levels of mutual acceptance’ with the Head of Science. But then, Schein asks, who really is the client? The senior leadership team have brought him in, unbidden by the Head of Science, and it has become increasingly apparent to him that relationships between the two levels are not good. Both parties seem to have different values, interests and perceptions of ‘the problem’ and the most difficult part of the deployment has been acting as a conduit between the two, keeping communications as open, honest and yet diplomatic, as he can. He discovers as he reads into the consultancy literature, that Schein belongs to a tradition of consulting known as Organization Development, (Burnes and Cook (2012), which is founded on democratic values and an ethical code of practice (White and Wooten, 1986). He resolves to explore this literature, and its critics, (Clark and Fincham, 2002), to think further about how he can become more politically astute and ethically aware as a system leader.

Jonathan is a Local Leader of Education, leadership coach, and part of a secondary heads group that is exploring the role of Heads as policy gatekeepers for their schools. Choosing to act in a mediatory position concerning policy enactment can exact a toll on their values and principles as educationalists, causing ‘ethical labour’ (Campbell, 2015). During their discussions of how headteachers might be drawn into principled democratic resistance to government education policy and seek to influence and change policy direction through engagement with relevant policy makers, they draw parallels with the notion of ‘Domain Theory’ (Kouzes and Mico, 1979), from the Organisation Development literature. This places the consultant in the role of mediator of values tensions between ‘policy’ , ‘management’ and ‘service’ domains in professional organisations , all with different principles, success measures, structures and work modes, as shown in table 2 below . The consultant’s task is to understand these ‘domains’ in order to develop bridging and conflict resolution strategies that encourage more effective joint working across them

*Table 2 : The three domains of public service organisations (Kouzes and Mlco, 1979)*

	POLICY DOMAIN	MANAGEMENT DOMAIN	SERVICE DOMAIN
Principles	Consent of the governed	Hierarchical control and coordination	Autonomy and self regulation
Success measures	Equity	Cost efficiency and effectiveness	Quality of service and standards of practice
Structure	Representative Participative	Bureaucratic	Collegial

Work modes	Voting Bargaining, negotiating	Use of linear techniques and tools	Client- centred Problem- solving
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Both David and Jonathan have begun to use the Organisation Development literature to reflect on specific and broad agendas in their consulting practice. The democratic values of this literature make it an appropriate starting point for the use of consultancy research in informing and reflecting on practice and for introducing the content of the ‘consultancy curriculum’. This curriculum includes consultancy skills, cycles and role tensions, types of client and interventions and the nature of impact and outcomes in consultancy. Democratic values and ethical practice from this tradition of study will underpin all remaining five propositions for consultancy development.

**Proposition 2:- Consultancy development and analysis**

A group of System Leaders of Education from a federation, an academy chain and a Teaching School Alliance are considering how organisational context affects client situations. They are working on the assumption that consultants need to be able to conduct good organisational analyses in order to arrive at informed diagnoses of client situations that produce judicious action. Discussion begins with single schools they work with, progresses to the nature of the school group they work within, and finally considers their use of external networks in helping clients. They draw analytical tools from three branches of research literature during their discussion.

For single school analysis, they draw from the generic literature principally concerned with single organisations, and encapsulated in what I have called ‘five literatures of organisation’ (Close and Raynor, 2010). Four of these literatures are based on Bolman and Deal’s analytical ‘frames’ (Bolman and Deal , 2008) and are theories of understanding encompassing structure, culture, psychology and politics in organisations. The fifth literature, complexity theory, is a theory of action that, through interaction of the four frames, attempts to describe how organisational life is actually played out on a day to day basis. At school group level, they draw on the school specific literature of structural reform and take what Woods and Simkins, (2014) call ‘the emerging school group as a unit of analysis.’ The sheer dynamism of the current policy landscape makes conceptualisations of organisational relationships difficult at present, but Woods and Simkins’ research mapping of such groups gives consultants variables and parameters to work with when seeking to understand whether or how new structures and forms of governance are influencing the dynamics of leader autonomy and control and the future character and identity of such groups. These variables and parameters are set out in table 3 below.

*Table 3 :Variables and parameters of emerging school groups. (Woods and Simkins, 2014)*

Variables	Parameters	
Management and governance	Hard centralised management and governance structure	Loose management and governance structure
Scale	Large number of schools	Small number of schools
Scope	Locally based	Widely spread
Status differentiation	Homogenous (that is, well performing) schools	Heterogenous mix of well /poorly performing schools
Phase composition	Mixed phase	Single phase
Invitation	Created from the centre	Built from below
Membership	Forced	Voluntary

The final phase of their discussion is on the use of external networks to help clients. For this they draw on a third branch of literature, network theory, (Hadfield and Jopling, 2012). .....and consultancy as 'hybrid leadership' (Townsend, 2015). This literature attempts to show how groups of individuals and organisations interact and develop professional relationships in networks. Hadfield and Jopling model what they call 'leader agency' in networks by considering the interplay between structure, purpose and identity of those networks for generating 'mutual knowledge'. This literature is useful for consultants because it helps them understand how to develop, draw support from, and exert influence in networks so as to increase their 'networked agency' with clients. Its theorising can also act as a reflective device for mapping and reflecting on fluctuations in their relationships in networks and analysing levels of trust and the interactions that have supported or dissipated such variations.

'System leader' consultants on development programmes need to be introduced to all three branches of organisational literature outlined above if they are to understand the interplay of structure and agency in their work.

### **Proposition 3:- Consultancy development and change**

Specialist Leader of Education David has analysed some Department performance issues with his Head of Science and agreed an action plan to address them through policies, staff deployments and teaching methods. He reflects on his reading and experience of personal and organisational change to consider what may enable and restrict the implementation of this plan in this particular school context. As he reads more widely in the change literature, he finds three strands of particular relevance to understanding change in school groups. These are sensemaking, (Weick et al 2005) identity formation (Puusa et al, 2013) and loosely/tightly coupled systems (Burke, 2014).

Weick et al, (2005), define sensemaking as 'constant redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive'. For consultants it involves gathering data on 'theories of events' about change from different interest groups, (Werkman, 2010). Typical questions might include beliefs about success of and barriers to change, reasons for failure of previous change efforts and ideal views of change processes. Consultants construct a 'cause map' of these varying explanations and from it present a meta analysis of the change situation to managers and staff in the hope of identifying and breaking any dysfunctional patterns of thought and action. Sensemaking is a test of democratic values for the consultant because, in the central endeavour of school improvement, it demands a balancing of interests between multiple clients, some more and some less powerful.

The literature on identity formation is relevant to change because, as new school groups and models of governance emerge, the questions who am I? and who are we? are going to become progressively more important for staff and managers when considering change processes. For example, Puusa et al, (2013) in their study of teachers and senior managers in developing educational organisations, found that, if perceptions of what was central, distinctive and enduring about the organisation were too different at different levels, the observed gap led to reduced teacher motivation and commitment with change efforts derailed and left unfinished. As they put it, 'when aiming for a fundamental organisational change, it is important not only to change the image, but also to consider the fundamental characteristics of the organisation, its identity and the varying interpretations of it' (p. 176).

At a broader level, the nature of change in loosely and tightly coupled systems mapped by Burke, (2014) in table 4 below, is an important area of understanding for consultants seeking to spread knowledge of school improvement. As Burke points out, for much of its history, the Organisation

Development literature has seen the consultancy role as ‘loosening’ tightly coupled bureaucratic systems by introducing participative working practices. In the current schools landscape, the goal of participation, underpinned by democratic values remains, but the consultancy role is now reversed to ‘tightening’ loosely coupled systems by helping establish new patterns, regularities and interdependencies in practice that are taken for granted by ‘tight’ systems. Key to this role is a consultancy process that is ‘accommodative,’ a readiness to work with multiple clients and ability to act as a linking agent for local, regional and national networks so that continuous small scale changes in loosely coupled school groups become wider and more ‘systemic.’

*Table 4 Change in loosely and tightly coupled systems, (Burke , 2014).*

Dimensions for comparison	Change in a loosely coupled system	Change in a tightly coupled system
Focus	continuous	episodic
Scale	small	large
Type of initiative	improvisational	planned
Consulting process	accommodative	constrained
Locus of change	Local	Systemic

My remaining three propositions for consultancy development now move from theories of understanding to theories of action and use a typology of consultancy work as ‘critical’, ‘functional’ and ‘socially critical’ (Gunter et al, 2015) to explore practice agendas at micro, meso and macro levels.

**Proposition 4.- Consultancy development and ‘political coaching’: the micro level.**

David realises that getting diagnostic judgements accepted and action plans implemented has a lot to do with influence, both upwards, downwards and sideways, in school hierarchies . Rehearsing for and reflecting on the use of influence in consultancy practice can be achieved through what I have called elsewhere ‘political coaching’ (Close, 2013). This is the micro level of operating practice, the client- consultant relationship. At this level, from a critical perspective, we are interested in ‘what happens and in whose interests’ as this relationship plays out over time, rather than the functionalist ‘what works’. Working with the complexities of the helping relationship requires consultants to be both psychodynamically aware and politically astute. There is already an extensive literature on the psychodynamics of consulting (Nevis, 1989, Hirschhorn,1991, Schein, 2002), so here, in a field dominated by functionalist and psychological perspectives, I will focus on the less travelled path, the notion of developing ‘political astuteness’ (Bottery, 2004) in consultants.

I have argued elsewhere that the notion of political astuteness in educational leadership can be understood, brought into explicit focus, and learned as a professional development activity through narrative coaching (Close, 2013). This requires a combination of academic study, storying of consulting experience and contracting activity, which I call ‘political coaching’. Political coaching first requires study of political and ethical concepts. These include the notions of ‘interests’ ‘power bases’ and ‘influencing tactics’ (Ball, 1987) and the interplay of ‘warrant,’ (legitimacy) ‘account’ (plausible justification) and ‘reputation’ (damaged or enhanced) in political behaviour (Buchanan and Badham , 2011). It means making everyday sense of concepts like ‘utility’, ‘rights’ and ‘justice’ (Haydon, 2007) while recognising that pragmatics of organisational realities can make ethical judgements problematic. These concepts provide the beginnings of a discourse for thinking about political astuteness and can be used to interrogate aspects of the broader consultancy curriculum within a professional development agenda.

As I mentioned in the ‘Values’ argument, the broader ‘consultancy curriculum’, within which political coaching is situated, typically identifies types of consultancy and client (Schein, 1999) and (schools’ appropriate) typologies of consultancy interventions (Cummings and Worley, 2001). It provides a strategic overview of the consultancy cycle (Neumann, 1997), of skills required at each stage of the cycle ( Lippitt and Lippitt, 1986, Block, 2011), and problematizes notions of ‘impact’ and ‘outcomes’ of consultancy work (Clark and Fincham , 2002). More subtly, it explores dilemmas and tensions all consultants experience when working at the boundaries of organisations (Sturdy et al, 2009). This may mean balancing feelings of marginality, affiliation and autonomy (Nevis, 1989) or resolving tensions, for example, between working to one’s own and the client’s agenda. (Harrison, 1995) or recognising in the client orientations within the organisation, be it apathy, dependence, gamesmanship or collegiality (Neilsen , 1984).

Once grounded in this broader curriculum, the ‘storying’ of consultancy experience can begin. The coaches role in this storying process is to help the consultant critically reflect on the interplay between identity, script and performance in their account of consultancy work. (Drake, 2010). Political coaching requires a ‘mature’ relationship between coach and consultant, variously defined as comfort with silence and self reflection, willingness to work at non rational levels, ability to articulate experience and confidence in self disclosure through such stories. This is a peer and reciprocal coaching relationship between two system leaders . The learning from such a relationship can then be used in turn for leadership coaching with middle and senior leaders as clients.

A summary of a conceptual framework for political coaching using a narrative coaching approach is given in table 5 below.

*Table 5: A framework for political coaching (Close, 2013)*

Political concepts	Political behaviour	Ethical judgements	Organisational realities	Narrative coaching
Interests Power bases Influencing tactics	Warrant Account Reputation	Utility Rights Justice	Incapacitating factors Double effects Overwhelming factors	Identity Script Performance

**Proposition 5. Consultancy’ development and organisational contracting : the meso level.**

The system leader group discussion has now moved beyond analysing client situations in school to school support to brokering the use and recruitment of external consultancies as strategic partners. This inter-organisational contracting relationship is the meso level of consultancy practice. Such a relationship between an external consulting organisation and ‘school system’ organisation, might be, for example, between a Teaching School Alliance and a local university which is being engaged as a strategic partner to co- design professional development resources for this programme. The contracting relationship between consultant and client at this level is key to how well work gets done and so of central importance as a focus for consultancy development. It follows then, that conceptual frameworks which attempt to describe the characteristics and relationships of effective consultancy organisations are relevant for informing consulting practice at this level.

With this in mind, I will assess and critique one such recent framework, developed by an educational consultancy organisation in the US. This framework has, so far, been theorised from a literature review (Hazle Bussey et al , 2014) and tested in an initial empirical study as part of a multi stage research process. (Mohammed et al , 2015). Hazle Bussey’s model consists of three interacting

agents, the consulting organisation, the school system organisation and the consultancy ‘partnership’ between the two organisations. Each ‘agent’ is described by a number of effectiveness measures, characterised as ‘quality domains’. These are mainly process measures for the consulting organisation and the consulting partnership and outcome measures for the school system client, as in table 6 below.

*Table :6: A framework for school system- consultant partnerships (Hazle Bussey et al, 2014)*

Consulting organisation Quality domains	Partnership Quality domains	School system Quality domains
Content expertise Process expertise Interpersonal skills Agility Role expectations Project management	Locus of accountability Trusting relationships Focus on building school system capacity	Leadership capacity Trusting relationships Structural alignment Role expectations Project management

The theory of action that drives the model is that variation in the characteristics and interactions of the agents produces variations in the school system capacity to achieve school improvement goals, through ‘direct and reciprocal effects.’ Clearly, with a vocabulary of ‘measures, effectiveness and ‘effects’ and an assumption of agreed improvement goals, the model has a strong functional orientation, with its associated strengths and limitations. Quality domains of ‘content, process expertise, role expectations and project management’ are sufficiently tangible and known in the respective literatures to be translatable as professional development activities. And, such activities can only help to clarify thinking about what value a consulting partner might add to school improvement processes. The notion of ‘capacity’ , ‘trusting relationships’ and ‘locus of accountability’ are more problematic in terms of reaching mutual understandings within an inter-organisational model that excludes wider stakeholders. The Theory of Action is also problematic if the intention is to mount research designs to ‘prove’ causation between the agents, rather than generate complex understandings of emerging relationships. When tested in interviews against the perceptions and experiences of practising consultants and school district clients, all quality domains were recognised as important to successful partnership relationships with, perhaps unsurprisingly, particular emphasis on content expertise and interpersonal skills. A key attribute of consultant/client relationships that emerged from the interviews, but that was not included in the framework, was a shared values base.

In sum, the model’s ‘quality domains’ provide a partial professional development agenda for contracting at the inter-organisational ‘meso’ level. Yet, despite detailed descriptors attached to each domain in the Hazle Bussey study, its functional paradigm needs enriching with a values base and a critical perspective to give explanatory power to consulting relationships arising from the domains as they play out over time. It also needs to look beyond inter-organisational relationships to broader ‘socially critical’ issues of consultancy development and knowledge production, to which we now turn.

**Proposition 6:- Consultancy development and knowledge production: the macro level.**

The final stage of the system leader group discussion moves beyond both micro interpersonal and meso inter-organisational relationships to the macro politics of public policy debate on knowledge production. Drawing on broad debates and individual cases, the group uses Gunter's 'socially critical' perspective on consultancy development to question how values and interests inform knowledge claims of consultancy organisations in Education services. Their purpose in so doing is to develop a critical stance and considered positions on this question at public policy level and in their engagement with consultancy organisations.

Developing such positions requires sophisticated understandings of two background debates (a) privatisation in education services. (Ball, 2007, 2012) and (b) the notion of 'consultocracy' in public administration. (Hood and Jackson, 1991, Saint Simon, 2004). It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer detailed discussion of both of these debates. Suffice to say that sophisticated understandings of privatisation require moving beyond simplistic public/private polarities, yet challenging 'economism' (Ball, 2007) with a moral and ethical discourse. Understanding 'consultocracy', or the degree to which 'technical experts' are taking over political processes in public administration, means asking further questions about political influence and public accountability of large corporate consultancies in education services. More specifically, the relevance of values, interests and knowledge claims to working with external consultancies can be shown, respectively, in several cases relating to school improvement, workforce recruitment and curriculum policy implementation.

Coffield's (2012) critique of the McKinsey reports on school improvement (2007, 2010) argue that they 'won't work' because of the technicist and authoritarian values that inform them. Greaney and Scott's (2014) research into sponsorship arrangements in academy chains reveals actual and potential conflicts of interest in the use of external consultancies under 'monopoly licence' for the provision of education services. An investigation by Clark, (2014) into the use of external consultancies in the government - driven policy implementation of synthetic phonics programmes in schools, reveals a disregard for expert opinion that leads her to move beyond the 'whose knowledge counts' question to ask 'how do people with knowledge that should count make themselves heard? A versing in background debates over privatisation and consultocracy, complemented by critical study of cases like these, can help system leaders challenge assumptions behind consultancy they get, in order to make the case for consultancy they want.

Table 7 below brings together elements of the agenda now presented into an overarching model. On the top row we have 'consultancy values' informed by three different paradigms of study. Functional 'what works' draws on technicist values, which we found wanting in the organisational contracting framework, critical 'what happens' looks at the politics and ethics of client/ consultant relationships, as they are played out over time at a micro level, 'socially critical 'in whose wider interests', looks at consultancy in the broader context of democratic process and social justice. On the middle row we have 'contextual dimensions' which reflect the frameworks on analysis and change I presented. I've further separated 'context' from 'agency' here because the literature on network theory has useful ideas for consultants seeking to understand more about how they exert influence in such environments. On the bottom row we have consultancy development at the three operating levels. Political Coaching at the micro level helps consultants make sense of influence in client interactions, Organisational Contracting at the meso level provides a skills agenda for consulting organisations and 'Knowledge that Counts' at the macro level prepares system leader consultants to challenge the knowledge claims of consultancy interests in the wider public policy arena, as well as reflecting on their own practice in this respect

Table 7:- A model of consultancy development:- summary. (Close. 2016)

<b>CONSULTANCY VALUES</b>	<b>Functionalist</b>  What works? (Coffield 2012)	<b>Critical</b>  'What happens? (Sturdy et al, 2009)	<b>Socially critical</b>  In whose (wider) interests? (Gunter et al, 2014)
<b>CONSULTANCY DIMENSIONS</b>	<b>Contexts</b>  Organisational analysis (Woods and Simkins, 2014)	<b>Agency</b>  Network theory (Hadfield and Jopling, 2012)	<b>Processes</b>  Change and Identity formation (Puusa et al, 2013)
<b>CONSULTANCY LEVELS</b>	<b>Micro</b>  Political coaching (Close, 2013)	<b>Meso</b>  Organisational contracting (Hazle Bussey et al 2014)	<b>Macro</b>  Knowledge that counts, (Clark, 2014)

I now move on to the practicalities of implementation of this model as a professional development programme in a school- led system.

### Discussion

How might this consultancy agenda be translated into professional development provision, and what challenges might such provision face in a form of organisation of growing importance in the English schools landscape:-The Teaching Schools Alliance?

Of the six areas of enquiry presented, the discursive nature of 'values', 'analysis' and 'change', what I have called the 'broader consultancy curriculum' that provides the context for 'political coaching', and the 'macro level' debates around consultancy and knowledge production are best suited to a seminar series that draws on key readings, case material and workshop activities co –produced with a strategic partner such as a local university. The daily practice nature of consultancy at micro and meso levels is more suited to the reciprocal learning approach of Joint Practice Development (Hargreaves, 2012) that would include, in this instance, coaching partnerships and learning sets. Ideally, each system leader would have access to a coaching partner and a learning set. Drawing on understandings from the seminar series, both forums would enable critical reflection on functional outcomes, psychodynamic processes and political relationships in consultancy work. This reflects Hawkins and Smith's (2006) model of consultancy as supervision, which addresses three needs,

*restorative* (dealing with anxiety) *developmental* (learning from application) and *managerial/evaluative* (meeting functional targets). Both these forums are appropriate in that they mirror consulting processes and practice. They are also complementary in that the learning sets provide a range of situations to learn from and the coaching partnerships depth of critical reflection on those situations. It is worth reminding ourselves at this point of key features of coaching partnerships and learning sets that provide effective professional development for consultants .

Coaching partnerships are nothing new in schools, but coaching partnerships that comprise system leaders learning about consultancy need special consideration in two respects. The first of these is reciprocal learning. System leaders in coaching partnerships need to organise their sessions so they can act as both coach and coachee in turn. Both members of the partnership construct narratives of their consultancy experience around a particular issue or problem they wish to examine. Each member then acts as coachee/client and coach/ consultant in turn, learning to interrogate each others' experience at restorative, developmental and managerial levels.

The second respect I will call 'political contracting'. All coaching requires some kind of contract of expectations between coach and coachee, but coaching that recognises the importance of micropolitics in consultancy work, particularly if coach and coachee are practitioners within the same organisational context, needs to make this aspect of contracting explicit. As I have argued elsewhere (Close, 2013) political contracting should be guided by three principles (1) *good politics*:- the emphasis of coaching conversations will be on political issues that do not damage others and that speak for wider interests beyond the self, although any organisational processes seen as unfair will be legitimate subjects for examination. (2) *appropriate self- disclosure*:- in the case of interests that coach or coachee may have in the political situation being explored and (3) *self- advocacy*:- that the coaching sessions are to develop independence of judgement, rather than relying on advocacy outside the session from a coaching partner that may have drawn indirectly on confidences exchanged during sessions. This third principle is especially important when there is hierarchical difference between system leaders in the coaching partnership.

Learning sets complement coaching partnerships by adding range to depth of reflection on consulting experience. Both mirror the consulting process itself by giving 'air time' to consultants as clients to talk about and get feedback on issues in their consulting work. As for coaching partnerships, learning about consulting process involves progressive understandings of intertwined functional, psychodynamic and political aspects of helping relationships as they emerge in problem analysis. As is already well known from the literature (eg McGill and Brockbank, 2004) learning sets typically consist of a group of 4-6 members who initially contract ground rules of operation. Facilitators, whose role would rotate between sessions, enable the group to consult in turn to each of its members as clients, and provide confidential 'working notes' (Hirschhorn, 1991) on both process and content issues arising from this consulting activity. These 'working notes' are designed to move forward consultancy learning of the whole group in a safe environment. It is important to emphasise that, as long as their rigour of process and purpose is maintained, learning sets are uniquely suited to consultancy learning and must not be allowed to degenerate into mere discussion groups.

What implementation challenges might such a programme face in the emergent organising framework for school groups set out in the introduction:- the Teaching Schools Alliance? Challenges in implementing a consultancy development agenda like this in such a context may occur around its approach, its dynamics and its assumptions about hierarchy from within and issues around the engagement of a strategic partner from without. Regarding its approach, introducing

psychodynamics and micropolitics into a marketised and functionalist professional development world may be easier in seminar delivery mode, but more complex in coaching partnerships or learning sets where concepts have not only to be understood, but internalised in practice over time. Atkins et al , (1997), for example, found that when introduced to psychodynamic approaches, trainee consultants responded at varying levels of sophistication, from 'no impact', through 'sophisticated client' and 'skilled diagnostician' to 'psychoanalytic consultant'. More worryingly, some trainee consultants were so willing to try out such approaches without properly understanding them that they became 'dangerous consultants'!. Similarly, introducing 'political coaching to existing coaching/leadership development provision will need careful justification, adequate preparation and contracting.

A key challenge will be linking this approach with National College training already received by system leaders. It will mean finding ways to develop consultancy learning further by introducing new critiques and conceptualisations to the areas of study already identified in such training. For example, the mandatory one day core training for Specialist Leaders in Education has four aims (1) *to understand the current climate involving school to school support*, (2) *to appreciate the importance of an emotionally intelligent SLE*, (3) *to build a toolkit of skills to become an effective SLE* and (4) *to prepare SLEs for deployment*.(NCTL 2014). 'The current climate' could be investigated further via policy debates , 'emotionally intelligent' set in the context of the psychodynamics of the helping relationship, while functional tasks involved in 'skills' and 'deployment' could be further conceptualised from the 'consultancy curriculum' I outlined earlier.

Then there are questions of dynamics and sustainability. Rather than a one off course, this is a long-term agenda for consultancy development, a habit of study, drawing from a range of delivery modes within a set of frameworks. As such, a balance will need to be struck between what are seen as desirable and resourceable long standing arrangements that contribute to the overall leadership development infrastructure of the TSA over time, such as the seminar series, coaching partnership or learning set, and flexible responses to sometimes discontinuously changing needs and circumstances within the TSA as they arise. Central to these resourceable arrangements at both school group and whole system level, will be the development of more considered policies around remuneration for system leaders in particular and external consultancy services in general, that reflect the values of a 'system leader approach'.

At present Specialist Leaders of Education are funded by 'exchange of services' arrangements, daily rates that reflect their salaries, or least satisfactorily, through supply cover. National Leaders of Governance face the challenge of providing free consultancy days and then having to charge for their services, and National Leaders of Education, the prospect of a Payment by Results system. Meanwhile, recalling Greany and Scott's , (2014), research into sponsorship arrangements in academy chains, there is an ongoing debate about what 'at cost' means in the provision of external consultancy services More considered policies that addressed these challenges would take into account three factors (1) redirection of government funding from 'old' CPD capacity building programmes to 'new' Joint Practice Development Approaches. (For example, Greany, (2014) compares the £55m funding for Teaching Schools and National College leadership development in 2012-13 with £342m invested in CPD programmes for schools in 2007-8 by the National Strategies, Training and Development Agency and Local Authorities);(2) agreement about 'fair rates' for system leader and external consultancy remuneration, and (3) in the case of National Leaders of Education, whether we want system leaders who are professional helpers or merely market providers.

Engaging a long term strategic partner from outside the TSA to support the process of system leader consultancy development will be of key importance. The Hazle Bussey model (2014) of consulting partnerships may be useful here for checking mutual understandings of 'quality domains' during the contracting process. and, more broadly, other relevant parts of the agenda, for establishing whether the consulting organisation is committed to democratic values and plurality and diversity of approach argued for herein. Once an initial contract has been agreed within these broad terms, specific early support might include suggested readings and designs for seminars and workshops and modelling of facilitation of coaching partnerships and learning sets.

Finally, my argument for an 'Organisation Development' approach to consultancy development is founded on democratic values and these values might challenge hierarchical assumptions about professional development provision. It rests on the paradoxical assumption that we understand hierarchy better by working non-hierarchically. So, rather than designing a suite of consultancy courses for differing levels of seniority, the aim of this programme is to create forums for system leaders at different levels (National, and Local as well as Specialist Leaders in Education) to share experiences of hierarchy, 'interests' and influence in their work within the common reference frame of consultancy. This awareness of multiple clients makes system leaders 'organisation' or more appropriately, 'institution' (Glatter, 2015) rather than 'management' consultants, is central to democratic process, and should be a key feature of professional development activity. .

## **Conclusion**

My question at the beginning of this article was that, if, as a professional community, we believe education should be a public service in a democratic society, what sort of system leader consultants do we want in the future? My assumptions about the values and concerns of education professionals within this question will, of course, be open to continuing debate. The consultancy development agenda I have presented to address this question has set out six areas of enquiry and propositions for action that are appropriate to Hargreaves' vision of a 'system leadership approach' in a self improving school system. Accordingly, the agenda moves beyond taken for granted training approaches of 'what works' tool kits to more critical historical and political interpretations of consultancy practice, building on existing research in the field in terms of its scope, conceptualisation and values base.

It has also considered some of the practicalities and challenges of implementing such an agenda in a school - led system, including its appropriateness for Joint Practice Development and engaging strategic partners. A future direction for this research could be to track the consulting process whereby an R and D consultancy group of system leaders of all designations from across several Teaching School Alliances is set up, introduced to the agenda and begins to co - construct professional development activities with an appropriate strategic partner.

My central premise throughout has been that the effective exercise of system leadership depends on certain understandings and proficiencies about which there is now considerable knowledge in the field of consultancy. Essentially, it says that we want consultants who are politically astute and ethically aware, who can bring policy- appropriate understandings of organisation, change and contracting to their work with individual clients and client organisations, and who can contribute to wider policy debates around consultancy and knowledge production. These understandings and proficiencies are needed to equip consultants with the moral and ethical discourse that Ball, (2007) sees as essential for challenging 'economism' in the central endeavour of re-defining public worth in a marketised system. This agenda is not just for the most senior, it is a professional development

entitlement and responsibility for system leader consultants at all levels . It is a long term agenda for a democratic future.

### **Note on contributor**

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