

# Aims, objects, and levers

A thematic analysis of school trust executive perspectives on school improvement

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## Abstract

This paper reconceptualises school improvement in school trusts, specifically multi-academy trusts, by foregrounding the professional reasoning of trust leaders. While existing research has tended to analyse trusts as policy instruments or organisational forms, it has paid limited attention to how leaders themselves define, prioritise, and enact improvement across groups of schools. Drawing on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with fourteen trust executives, the study develops a practice-based account structured around three domains: aims, objects, and levers of improvement.

The analysis shows that trust leaders articulate multidimensional aims that extend beyond accountability metrics, and consistently prioritise three core objects of improvement: culture, teaching and curriculum, and leadership. It further identifies eight categories of levers through which leaders seek to influence practice. Crucially, the findings demonstrate that these levers are not neutral or universal techniques but valenced mechanisms whose effects vary according to context and enactment. The concept of lever valence captures how the same mechanism may alternately enable or constrain improvement.

The paper argues that trust-led school improvement is best understood not as the application of fixed strategies, but as the ongoing calibration of multiple, interacting levers. In doing so, it offers a new conceptual lens that positions trust leaders as agentic practitioners and challenges instrumental accounts of school improvement in multi-academy trusts.



# 1. Introduction

Academy trusts now educate the majority of pupils in England, with many operating as multi-academy trusts (Department for Education, 2024).<sup>1</sup> However, academic research has not kept pace with the scale and influence of the trust sector. While scholars over decades have extensively examined school improvement at the level of individual schools<sup>2</sup>, the work of trust level leaders – those responsible for improvement across groups of schools – has received comparatively limited attention, in part because of the sector’s relative novelty. Much of the literature that does exist frames academies and trusts primarily as New Public Management<sup>3</sup> policy instruments<sup>4</sup>, thus shaping the analytical lens researchers adopt. Such work provides important insights into how trusts are originated, structured, regulated, and incentivised, but it sheds far less light on the practice of trust leadership: the professional judgements, educational priorities, and improvement strategies employed by senior executives.

This under representation matters. Trust leaders are pivotal actors in England’s school improvement architecture<sup>5</sup>; the leaders enacting at scale England’s ‘self-improving system’.<sup>6</sup> As accounting officers and system leaders, they shape curriculum, pedagogy, culture, and professional development across multiple schools.<sup>7</sup> Their work has implications not only for organisational coherence but also for children’s experiences, staff development, and the quality of education more broadly.

Calls for evidence-informed practice, such as Goldacre (2013), have tended to centre on the practices of school teachers and leaders.<sup>8</sup> Logically, in order for evidence informed practice to flourish in a school system increasingly organised into multi-academy trusts, the sector also requires research that attends to how trust leaders lead the improvement of multiple schools, including how they define improvement, what aspects of schooling they prioritise, and the mechanisms they use to generate and sustain change. This work is especially important given the government’s intention to move all schools within trusts over time.<sup>9</sup> Spillane et al. (2002) find that education policy is not implemented as a straightforward process of compliance with directives, but through a process of interpretation in which actors actively construct meaning based on their prior knowledge, beliefs, and contexts.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, exploring the knowledge, beliefs and contexts of trust leaders is

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1 Department for Education, [Open academies, free schools, studio schools and UTCs](#)

2 Hopkins, D and Reynolds, D (2001) ‘The Past, Present and Future of School Improvement: Towards the Third Age’, *British Educational Research Journal*, 27(4), 459-475.

3 Hood, C (1991) ‘A public management for all seasons?’, *Public Administration*, 69(1), 3-19.

4 West, A and Bailey, E (2013) ‘The development of the academies programme: “Privatising” school-based education in England 1986-2013’, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 61(2), 137-159; Male, T (2017) ‘Leadership in multi-academy trusts’. *International Conference on Educational Leadership & Management*, Kingston, Jamaica, UCL IOE; Greany, T and Higham, R (2018) *Hierarchy, markets and networks: analysing the ‘self-improving school-led system’ agenda in England and the implications for schools*. UCL IOE Press; Greany, T and Higham, R (2022) ‘School system governance and the implications for schools’, *School leadership and education system reform*. Second edition. London: Bloomsbury, 37-46; Greany, T and Earley, P (2022) ‘Introduction’, *ibid*; Greany, T and McGinity, R (2021) ‘Structural integration and knowledge exchange in multi-academy trusts: comparing approaches with evidence and theory from non-educational sectors’, *School Leadership & Management*, 41(4-5), 311-333.

5 Simon, CA, James, C and Simon, A (2021) ‘The Growth of Multi-Academy Trusts in England: Emergent Structures and the Sponsorship of Underperforming Schools’, *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(1), 112-127.

6 Hargreaves, DH (2010) [Creating a self-improving school system](#). National College; Hargreaves, DH (2012) [A self-improving school system: towards maturity](#). National College.

7 Cruddas, L (2025) *New domains of educational leadership*. London: Hachette Learning.

8 Goldacre, B (2013) *Building evidence into education*. Department for Education.

9 Department for Education (2026) [Every child achieving and thriving](#).

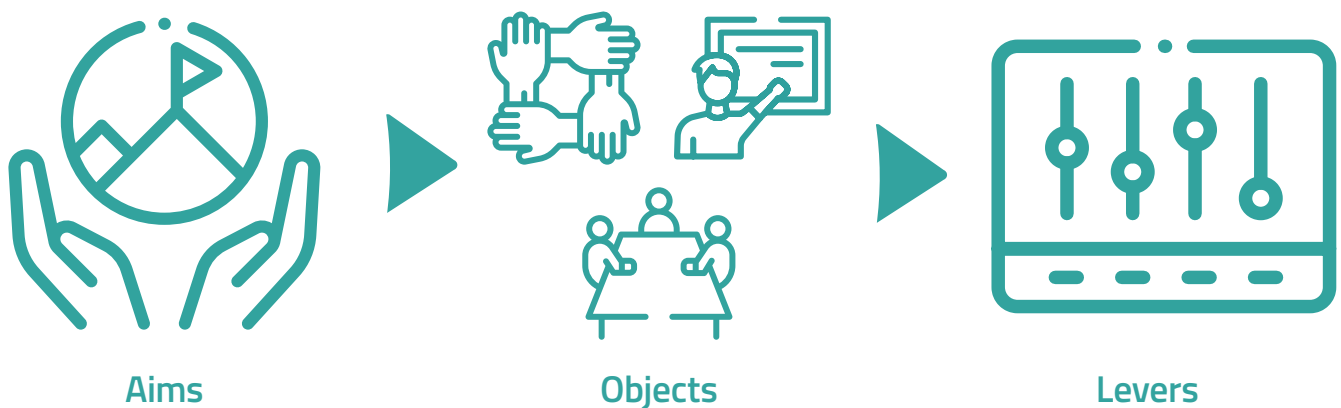
10 Spillane, JP, Reiser, BJ and Reimer, T (2002) ‘Policy Implementation and Cognition: Reframing and Refocusing Implementation Research’, *Review of Educational Research*, 72(3), 387-431.

essential for understanding the work trusts perform.

This study begins to respond to that need by conceptualising trust leaders as knowledgeable agents operating within a field of professional practice.<sup>11</sup> The study develops a conceptualisation of school improvement as the calibration of multiple 'valenced levers', whose effects vary according to context and enactment.

Instead of examining trusts primarily as administrative structures, or simply hierarchies of control, the study explores the educational and professional reasoning underlying trust leaders' decision making. Through thematic analysis of interviews with fourteen trust executives, it explores three core questions:

1. What **aims** do trust leaders associate with school improvement?
2. What **objects** of schooling do they most commonly seek to change?
3. What **levers** do they use to bring about those changes?



By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to a more practice attentive understanding of trust led improvement. It offers a conceptualisation of improvement that moves beyond narratives of organisational control and hierarchy, recognising trust leaders as practitioners. By doing so the analysis foregrounds their educational judgement, strategic choice, experience and professional expertise.

This has implications for practice and policy, especially that concerned with England's school trust landscape. However, it is plausible the insights it provides could have relevance in international contexts where multi-school organisations (MSOs) that share similarities with school trusts are in operation, such as in the Charter movement in the USA<sup>12</sup>, and the work being done to advance MSOs in Australia<sup>13</sup>, which includes a pilot in Tasmania<sup>14</sup>.

11 Rollett, S (2021) *Communities of improvement: School Trusts as fields of practice*. Confederation of School Trusts.

12 Farrell, C, Wohlstetter, P and Smith, J (2012) 'Charter Management Organizations', *Educational Policy*, 26(4), 499-532.

13 Hunter, J, Haywood, A and Parkinson, N (2024) *Spreading success: Why Australia should trial multi-school organisations*. The Grattan Institute.

14 Baylis, V (2024) 'Independent Review of Education in Tasmania'; Palmer, J. (2025) '*Independent review of education final report backs lifting literacy*.' Tasmanian Government.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Participants and sampling

Fourteen trust leaders participated in semi structured interviews.<sup>15</sup> All held roles with significant responsibility for school improvement at trust level. Eight were chief executive officers, and six were senior executives with cross trust oversight of education (such as directors of education).

Purposive sampling ensured the group reflected diversity across:

- Department for Education regions (leaders drawn from eight of nine regions)
- Trust size (from small trusts with three to five schools to very large trusts with 31-40 schools)
- Performance profile (including trusts with below average, average, and above average KS2/KS4 progress scores)
- Proportion of disadvantaged pupils
- Trust ethos, including representation from faith based trusts

The intention was not representativeness but analytic richness: capturing variation in organisational models, contexts, and improvement philosophies across the sector.

### 2.2 Data collection

Interviews, each lasting around sixty minutes, were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. The interview schedule covered three broad domains:

1. Leaders' definitions of "school improvement" and their underlying aims
2. The aspects of schooling they commonly focus on when seeking improvement
3. The approaches, strategies, and mechanisms through which they enact improvement

Participants were encouraged to elaborate on their reasoning, examples, and experiences.

### 2.3 Analysis

Thematic analysis broadly followed Braun and Clarke (2006) and reflected a social realist epistemological position.<sup>16</sup> As such, the researcher is regarded as active in the research process rather than a neutral observer, but it is not the case that the meanings identified through the study can be reduced to a reflection of the researcher's choices.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymised, and coded using a theoretical analytical approach. Coding focused on meaning bearing units relating to the three core domains that shaped the semi-structured interview guide. In total, 535 segments were coded as 'relevant'<sup>17</sup> to these domains, although it is important to note the specific framing of 'aims', 'objects' and 'levers' was derived from the data and was not a feature of the interview guide language. Similarly, the

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15 Adams, WC (2015) 'Conducting semi structured Interviews', in KE Newcomer, HP Hatry, and JS Wholey (eds) *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*. First edition. Wiley, 492-505; Bearman, M (2019) 'Focus on methodology: Eliciting rich data: A practical approach to writing semi-structured interview schedules', 20(3); Ruslin et al (2022) 'Semi-structured interview: A methodological reflection on the development of a qualitative research instrument in educational studies', *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 12(1), 22-29.

16 Braun, V and Clarke, V (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. Maton, K (2014) *Knowledge & knowers: towards a realist sociology of education*. London: Routledge.

17 Naeem, M et al (2023) 'A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22.

themes and sub themes identified were derived from the data rather than imposed by the interview guide, as advised by Braun and Clarke.

Thematic analysis involved iteratively grouping these segments into themes and sub themes, comparing patterns between CEOs and non CEOs, and examining how leaders described relationships between aims, objects, and levers. 'Recognizable' themes were identified in the coded data.

The analysis was interpretive rather than purely descriptive: it sought to illuminate the underlying logics and values shaping trust level improvement practice. Initial codes were reviewed, reworked and defined through an iterative process of mapping as per phases three, four, and five of Braun and Clarke. The final stage of the analysis, following identification of themes and sub-themes, was to develop a conceptual model to account for the three domains, particularly for the complexity of the 'levers', as per Naeem et al.

## 2.4 Limitations

It is important to be transparent about the limitations of any study. In terms of scope, this research is limited to trust leaders' perceptions of school improvement. It does not seek to substantiate the claims made by participants or to measure the impact of the strategies they describe.

Thematic analysis is shaped by the researcher's interpretive decisions, including the coding and categorisation of data. As such, it cannot be regarded as a purely objective account in which the researcher stands outside the phenomenon under study. In addition, given the relatively small sample size, caution is required in making general claims about all trust leaders; the findings presented here reflect how the fourteen interviewees conceptualised trust-led school improvement.

However, these limitations do not preclude broader insight. The study purposively sampled leaders from a range of trust contexts, enabling analytical rather than statistical generalisation through comparison across diverse cases. In this sense, the study aligns with Flyvbjerg's (2006) argument that carefully selected cases can contribute to research through context-dependent knowledge and the "force of example," rather than only through statistical representativeness.<sup>18</sup> The study also contributes to theory-building, which is inherently iterative and conjectural.<sup>19</sup> While it does not represent the definitive account of trust leaders' perspectives, it provides a foundation upon which further research can build, test, and refine.

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<sup>18</sup> Flyvbjerg, B (2006) 'Five misunderstandings about case-study research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219-245.

<sup>19</sup> Eisenhardt, KM (1989) 'Building theories from case study research', *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 532-550; Weick, KE (1989) 'Theory construction as disciplined imagination', *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 516-531.

## 3. Findings

The findings are presented through three interlocking thematic lenses: Aims, Objects, and Levers. Together, these illuminate what trust leaders are trying to achieve, what parts of schooling they focus on to achieve it, and how they attempt to bring about change.

### 3.1 Defining the aims of trust led school improvement

Across all fourteen interviews, leaders articulated clear intentions for their improvement work. These fell into four overarching categories:

- **Institution oriented aims:** improving the quality, functioning, or trajectory of a school
- **Child oriented aims:** improving children’s academic, holistic, and lived experiences
- **Professional oriented aims:** enhancing staff expertise, capacity, and practice
- **Faith oriented aims:** furthering a religious ethos and/or mission (in faith trusts)

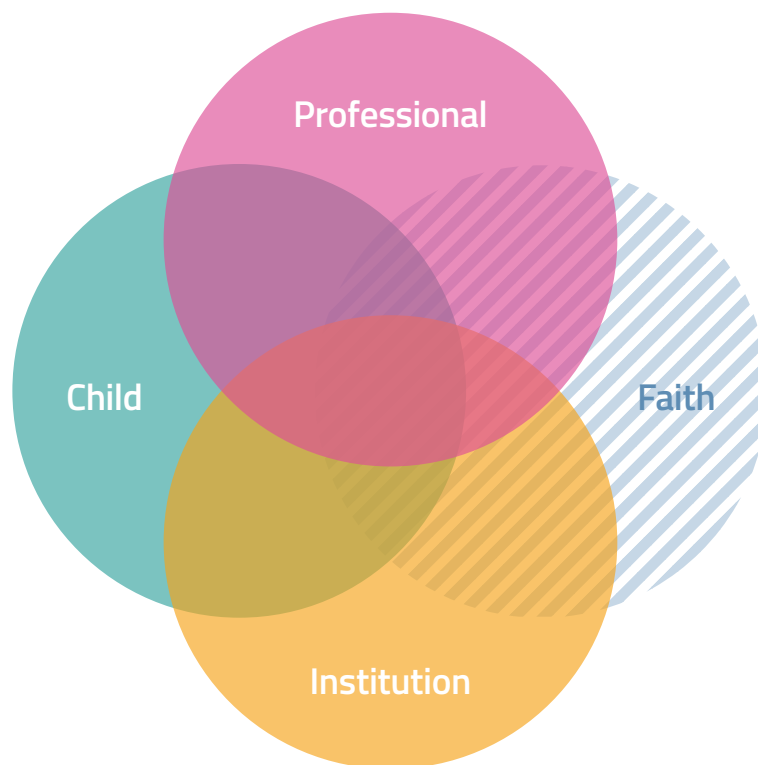
The categories often overlapped. Leaders typically saw improvement as multidimensional, with changes to institutions linked to changes in staff capability and children’s experiences. It’s important to note the distinction between child-oriented and other-oriented aims does not imply the leaders in the study do or do not prioritise children. Given trusts exist solely for the purpose of advancing education for the public benefit (according to their articles of association), this analysis assumes that ultimately all leaders’ aims are rooted in positively impacting on children. Rather, the analysis offered in this paper is about understanding how these aims are expressed, conceptualised, and reasoned. It is clear that some responses foregrounded the aim of developing professionals because they viewed it as foundational to deliver educational quality for children. Similar can be said about institutional and faith-oriented aims.

#### 3.1.1 Institution oriented aims

Both CEOs and non-CEOs described their aims in terms of institution-oriented aims, but CEOs were especially likely to frame improvement as organisational development. They spoke of:

- “Looking at every aspect of the school, not just education”
- “Operational improvements that are needed. So, for example, financial stability, workforce planning, infrastructure and so on.”
- Considering schools’ improvement trajectories over time: “It’s not just about that one school improvement for the broken schools...School improvement is for schools at all stages of their development.”

It could be argued this reflects the broader organisational responsibility CEOs hold as accounting officers for large and complex groups of schools.



*Overlapping orientation of aims*

### 3.1.2 Child oriented aims

Within this theme, two sub themes emerged:

- Academic outcomes (progress and attainment)
- Holistic outcomes (belonging, character, lived experience, wellbeing, preparedness for life)

Several leaders explicitly rejected narrow interpretations of improvement as being about examination results, instead emphasising the whole child. For example; "Children first is probably how I would describe school improvement in its purest sense. So, everything we try and do around school improvement in Trust C is around that sense of children first...

And, you know, how from a sense of both their lived experience in and around school, but also their academic achievement as well. So that kind of whole person. So sometimes school improvement can become quite limiting as in people assume automatically that means our examination results. Well, yeah, that's an important part of school improvement but it's not the only school improvement driver we want to kind of pull here, particularly around things like character and belonging and careers and people's lived experience."

Indeed, no trust leader defined school improvement aims only in terms of academic outcomes. Non-CEOs most frequently emphasised children's holistic outcomes.

### 3.1.3 Professional oriented aims

A number of leaders conceptualised improvement through staff development. For example, improving teacher expertise, strengthening leadership capability and ensuring professionals create the conditions for learning.

Non-CEOs were slightly more likely than CEOs to emphasise professional-oriented school improvement aims, which were largely a causal chain premised on the idea that by improving staff expertise school quality will increase. As one CEO put it, "it means that we're working with adults because actually it's the adults who need to make the change, a change in development in order to then impact the children at a better rate."

### 3.1.4 Faith oriented aims

Two leaders in faith based trusts identified spiritual, moral, and faith aligned aims as integral to their improvement work. Leaders from non faith trusts did not reference this dimension.

### 3.1.5 Contesting the term "school improvement"

Two leaders challenged the language of 'school improvement' itself:

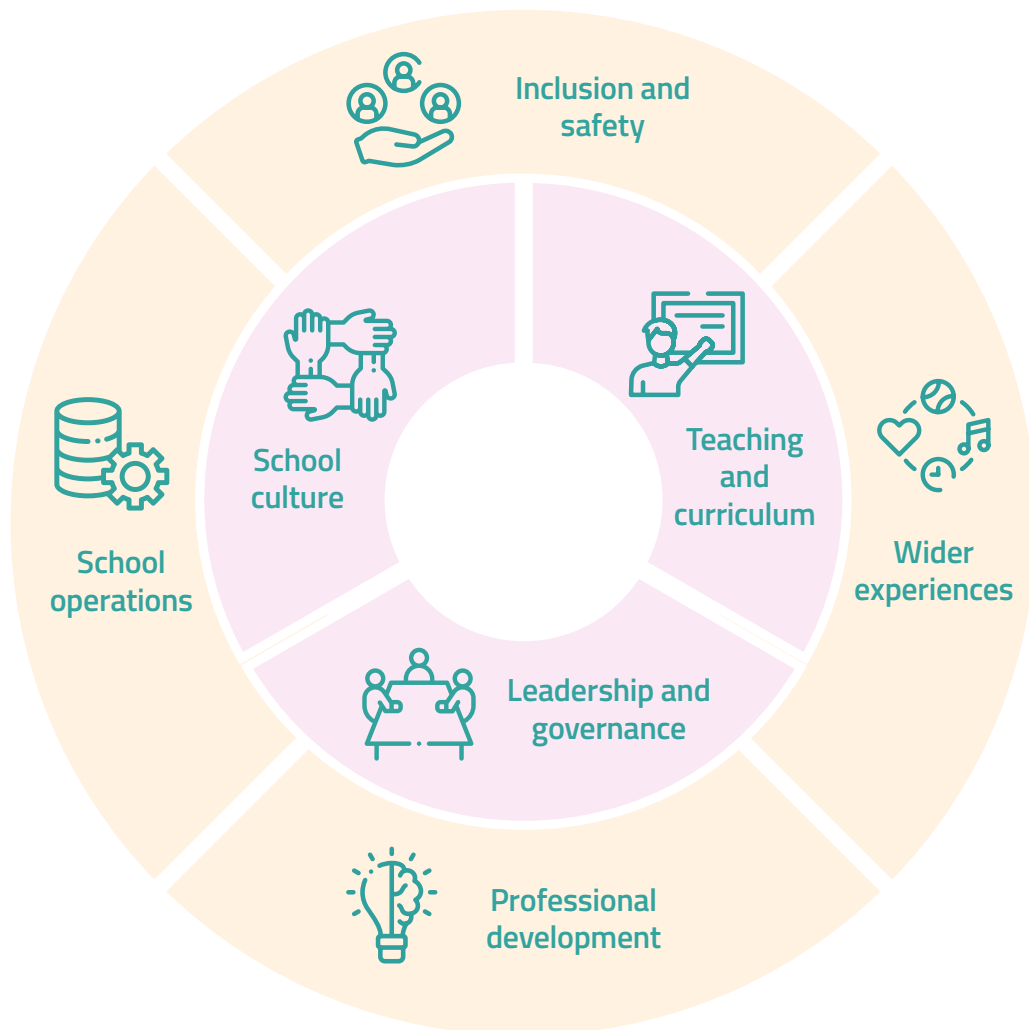
- One argued the term becomes overly abstract and disconnected from lived realities of teachers.
- Another rejected the deficit connotations, feeling it invited "top down, outside in" approaches.

## 3.2 Identifying the objects of trust led school improvement

While aims describe why leaders act, objects describe what they attempt to change. Leaders were not asked to rank priority areas, but to describe the aspects of schools that are commonly the focus of their school improvement work. In total 122

comments were coded across seven themes that emerged from the analysis:

1. School culture
2. Teaching and the curriculum
3. School leadership and governance
4. Inclusion and safety
5. Professional development
6. School operations
7. Wider experiences



*Objects of school improvement, with three commonly foregrounded core domains*

The objects varied in frequency and emphasis, but all were treated by interviewees as legitimate foci of trust led school improvement.

### **3.2.1 School culture**

Culture emerged as the most frequently mentioned object, with CEOs in particular more likely to speak about it. Many trust leaders saw it as foundational.

The theme of school culture theme was further differentiated into four sub-themes:

- Behaviour and attitudes of children
- Professional culture in the school
- Consistency of implementation by staff
- General comments about school culture

Behaviour and attitudes was spoken about most commonly. This was reflected in comments such as, “you could sort out behaviour which typically would do in the first stage.” For some trust leaders this was expressed not only as a matter of sequencing but of priority;

- “When we first go into a school, on the education side our priority is behaviour.”
- “It comes back absolutely to behaviour.”
- “Behaviour. Behaviour front and foremost.”

CEOs spoke more about improving behaviour and attitudes than non-CEOs.

### 3.2.2 Teaching and the curriculum

The second most common object was the ‘teaching the curriculum’ theme. Comments in this area focused on the expertise of teachers and the approaches they adopt, typified by this example: “The quality of that teaching, the materials, the expertise and confidence of that teacher to bring it to life, to pitch it at the right level for the pupils that they’ve got in their class, is essential.”

Leaders emphasised three sub-themes within this domain:

- Curriculum and assessment
- Instruction/pedagogy
- Literacy and communication

Non CEOs referenced literacy specifically; CEOs did not. It’s important not to over-interpret this finding, but it is possible the extra level of granularity expressed by non-CEOs in relation to teaching the curriculum is reflective of their proximity to this work taking place in schools, whereas CEOs perhaps have a more abstracted view.

### 3.2.3 School leadership and governance

School leadership and governance formed the third most frequently identified object of improvement. Trust leaders repeatedly emphasised the pivotal role of headteachers in determining the success of a school. As one trust leader remarked, “if we get the right heads in, whatever school it is, the school improvement seems to then largely follow.” Similarly, another reflected, “consistently for me, for [sic] my experience it all comes down to the head teacher.”

Comments within this theme were less granular than those concerning culture or pedagogy, but the tone was strikingly consistent:



leaders viewed headteachers as the central agents of improvement and frequently described improving school leadership as a recurring focus of trust level work.

### 3.2.4 Inclusion and safety

Although less frequently mentioned than culture or pedagogy, inclusion and safety were cited by several leaders as objects requiring trust level attention. Leaders raised two key sub-themes:

- SEND and inclusion
- Safeguarding

While CEOs and non-CEOs acknowledged the importance of SEND and inclusion to school improvement, the CEOs in particular seemed to take a broad system view of inclusion. For example, one CEO explained “it’s about inclusion, deep, deeply thinking about inclusion, which could be from a sort of protected characteristics perspective of what’s it really like to, you know, to be a same sex parent in our community.”

### 3.2.5 Professional development

Professional development emerged as another object of improvement. Non-CEOs spoke about PD as an object of school improvement more frequently than CEOs, although both groups mentioned it. CEOs framed staff development as integral to broader organizational goals, such as “raising standards” and achieving “high outcomes for all children”. This perspective links professional development to strategic objectives, viewing “our people” as key enablers. Non-CEOs focused more on the practical aspects of staff development, including the “support and development” needed to improve educational experiences and address mindset challenges. There’s also a direct acknowledgement of the need to “invest in the skill of the teachers” and support staff. While both groups recognize the importance of professional development, CEOs appear to align it with overarching strategic moves, whereas non-CEO executive leaders concentrate on the tangible resources, skills, and support required for effective implementation.

The dual status of professional development – as both an object and a lever – became more apparent in leaders’ later discussions of how improvement is enacted, which is explored in a subsequent section.

### 3.2.6 School operations

A smaller number of leaders referenced operational systems as an improvement focus. This included timetabling, resource management, administrative processes and logistical infrastructures that support teaching and learning. While less prominent in frequency, these references aligned with CEOs’ broader organisational framing of improvement documented earlier.

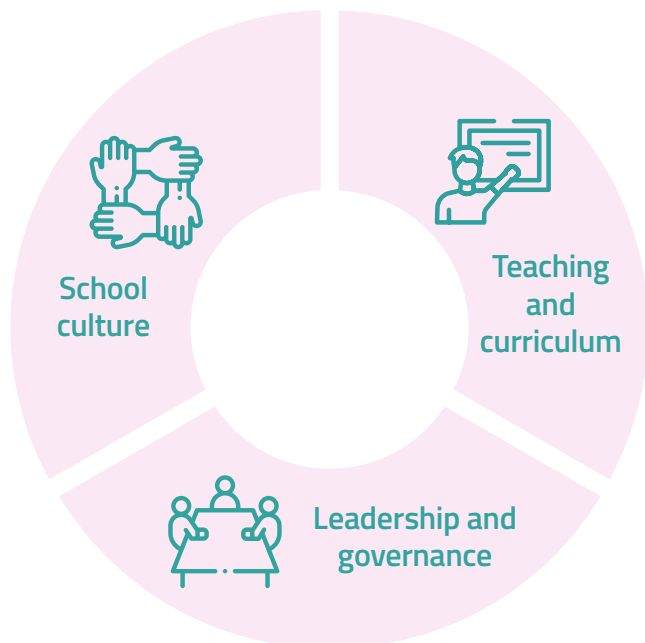
### 3.2.7 Wider experiences

Finally, wider experiences included reference to pastoral work and pupil’s wider curriculum, but it also includes parent and community-facing work, which was mentioned by two trust leaders.

While not dominant themes, these objects underscore the broader remit of trust level improvement, extending beyond teaching the academic curriculum to wider aspects of schooling and the relationship between school improvement and the wider context of the school.

### 3.2.8 Summary: Variation and coherence across school improvement objects

Although leaders highlighted a range of objects, they did not present them as



*Commonly foregrounded objects of school improvement*

equally weighted or universally relevant. A small number of comments even challenged the notion of there being common objects of improvement, emphasising instead that improvement priorities are necessarily context dependent. That said, this was only a small number of comments, with the overwhelming majority of comments accepting there are patterns in terms of what often needs improving in schools.

The thematic mapping reveals a coherent set of three most recurring concerns:

1. Culture as a foundational object of improvement; a sense that unlocking the right culture establishes the conditions for the other objects to be addressed more effectively.
2. Leadership and governance, especially leadership of the headteacher, as the primary enabling object; ensuring the school has the right leadership - with the right support around them - is a central focus of trusts' school improvement work.
3. Teaching and curriculum as the core educational object of improvement; focusing on improving educational outcomes by improving the quality of teaching, curriculum and assessment.

These three together formed the backbone of the objects of school improvement as described by participants. This is not altogether surprising given multiple analyses of school improvement over many years have highlighted these areas as being integral for school leaders and teachers to successfully enact school improvement.<sup>20</sup> However, the extent to which trust leaders also foreground these priorities suggests that they should be understood primarily as educational practitioners, rather than framed solely as neoliberal managers.

<sup>20</sup> Potter, D, Reynolds, D and Chapman, C (2002) 'School improvement for schools facing challenging circumstances: A review of research and practice', *School Leadership & Management*, 22(3), 243-256; Day, C et al. (2009) *The impact of school leadership on pupil outcomes*. Department for Children, Schools and Families; Leithwood, K, Harris, A and Hopkins, D (2020) 'Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited', *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5-22; Harris, A, Ismail, N and Jones, M (2023) 'Leading the improvement of underperforming schools: reviewing the contemporary evidence', *International Journal of Educational Management*, 37(5), 949-967.

### 3.3 Defining the levers of trust led school improvement

While aims and objects describe intentions and targets, levers represent the means through which trust leaders seek to bring about improvement. Leaders tended to describe these levers in more detail than the objects, often discussing them as strategic choices, interventions, or mechanisms.

Across the dataset, 374 coded segments concerned levers. These clustered into eight categories:

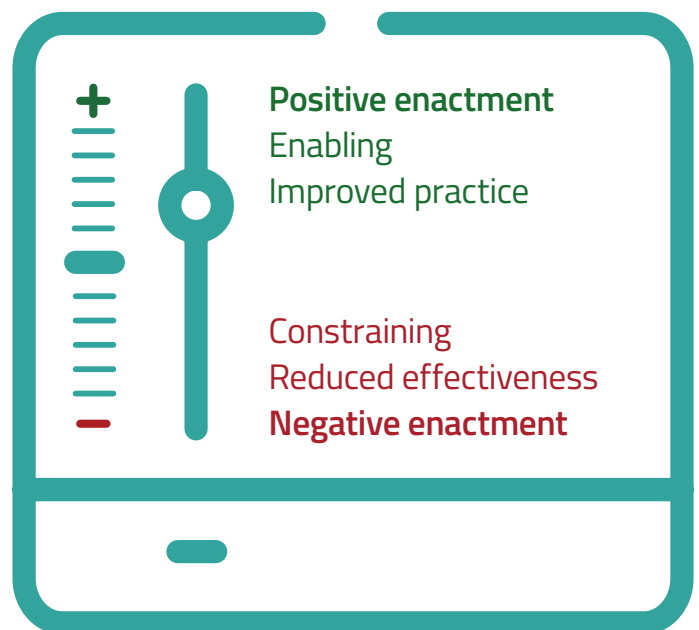
1. Staff expertise
2. Research and evidence
3. Quality assurance
4. Organisational strategy
5. Leadership
6. Culture, vision and values
7. Connectedness
8. Commonality

Each lever represents a different logic of improvement, and leaders varied in the extent to which they emphasised or contested them.

#### Lever valence

Research from beyond (Fixsen et al., 2005) and within education contexts illustrates that implementation matters greatly.<sup>21</sup> Collin and Smith point to ‘mechanisms’ of successful professional development, using the analogy of fluoride in toothpaste as an illustrative of an ‘active ingredient’ necessary for success.<sup>22</sup> While the research in this paper does not contain the necessary quantitative evidence to support claims about similar mechanisms in trust-led school improvement, the concept of mechanisms is a useful way of thinking about the levers trust leaders identified: these were the ingredients they said would impact on the efficacy of improvement initiatives. However, what was noticeable was that these levers were talked about in both positive and negative ways. To return to the toothpaste analogy above, trust leaders pointed to the need for fluoride but also the potential risks of ingesting too much of it.

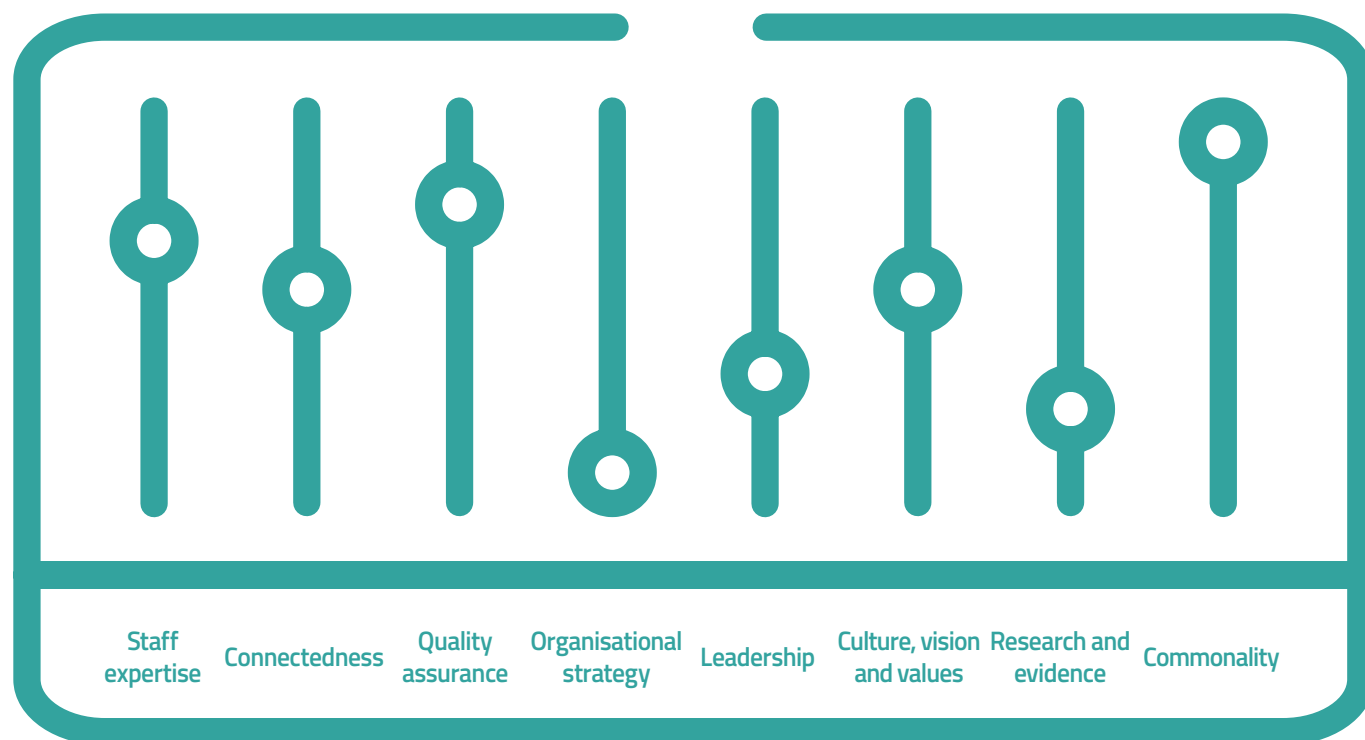
For example, while some trust leaders talked about the potential power of establishing more commonality across the group, others pointed to the potential drawbacks of doing so. Similarly, while trust leaders spoke positively about the use of research and evidence to inform improvement practices, some also expressed concerns about poor use of evidence. In this way, it was found that each of the levers could be viewed in both positive and negative ways: enablers and blockers. Negatively charged levers constrain or even undermine school improvement in the eyes of some participants, whereas positively charged levers facilitate or boost it. The concept of lever valence refers to whether, in a given context, a lever functions as an enabler or a constraint. Although developed in relation to



21 Fixsen, D L, Naoom, S F, Blase, K A, Friedman, R M & Wallace, F (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida.

22 Collin, J and Smith, E (2021) 'Effective Professional Development: Guidance Report'.

different constructs, this concept draws on Lewin's notion of valence within field theory, in which stimuli may exert attractive or repulsive forces on behaviour.<sup>23</sup> In this study, levers are understood in similar terms: depending on their enactment and context, levers may function to attract or discourage particular courses of action in trust-led school improvement. This is reflected in the analysis below, which distinguishes between positive and negative enactments of each lever as described by participants.



*Like a mixing desk, getting the best output requires adjusting each lever depending on the inputs*

To ensure analytical consistency, lever valence was coded by attending closely to how participants themselves characterised each lever during the interviews. Segments were marked as positively valenced when leaders described a lever as enabling, strengthening, or accelerating improvement (for example, when CPD was framed as a means of “levelling up” practice or creating opportunities for cross trust professional learning). Conversely, segments were coded as negatively valenced when leaders positioned the same lever as constraining or undermining improvement – such as insufficient staff expertise leading to misconceptions or weakened instructional quality, or poor use of evidence generating superficial or inappropriate approaches to practice. Coding therefore drew on (a) participants’ evaluative language, (b) explicit attributions of improvement or hindrance, and (c) descriptions of mechanisms through which a lever supported or impeded change. This approach reflects the interpretive orientation of the broader analysis and allowed valence to be treated not as an inherent property of a lever but as an assessment made by leaders within specific contexts.

### 3.3.1 Staff expertise

Staff expertise refers to the professional knowledge, skills, and capacity of teachers, leaders and support staff, which trust leaders saw as a foundational determinant of educational quality and improvement.

<sup>23</sup> Lewin, K (1951) *Field Theory in Social Science*. New York: Harper.

## Positive valence

**Effective CPD:** Improving staff expertise through CPD was seen as an important enabler for school improvement. Interviewees emphasized the importance of high-quality instruction and the need to continually “level up” teaching practices. Leaders talked about the opportunities provided by bringing teachers together from across the group to learn from each other, which was seen as a way of improving practice of leaders as well as teachers: “During the course of the year, there are four working parties, and those follow teaching and learning or staff development, pastoral, SMSC and curriculum and assessment. And the deputy heads and head teachers meet across the four schools so that they have an opportunity to work out what’s working and work out what needs to work better.”

Some trust leaders argued this sort of approach to CPD was a particular advantage of being in a trust: “because our schools are in a trust, they can access CPD and leadership development opportunities, which wouldn’t be available if they were in a single school. So obviously that’s access to me as like a CPD provider in a way. But it’s also we’ve got a teaching assistants’ program, and our teaching assistants have never had bespoke CPD before. We’ve got a subject leaders development program. We’ve got, leadership programs that people can attend.” Two leaders specifically spoke about ‘horizontal’ staff development taking place within the trust, which reflects a peer-to-peer and collaborative approach to development at scale.<sup>24</sup>

One CEO stated that “professional development is the key to ensuring you get the best for your children, because if you ensure you get the best for your adults who are working with them, then you getting the best for your children.” This highlights the perceived direct correlation between investment in staff development and school improvement.

## Negative valence

**Inadequate staff expertise and training:** A lack of staff expertise or appropriate CPD emerges as a significant barrier within the data, impacting various aspects of educational quality. For example, one trust leader explained how the implementation of a specific maths programme was often undermined by insufficient staff expertise: “you will almost always, unless it’s a really, really, really great school who have really done a lot of thinking and training, even then I would say, you’ll almost certainly see at least one teacher who is, without a huge amount of thinking, clicking through a PowerPoint that somebody else has made without a huge amount of understanding. You always see, because somebody else has made that resource and designed that lesson, you’ll almost always see a lack of subject knowledge belying, like, just some poor teaching or some misconception developing amongst children.”

Another participant noted that post-merger with another trust, there were colleagues in roles “you would not have appointed to that job because you don’t think they’ve got the knowledge and expertise to do it as effectively as you would want them to.” Another remarked, leaders may lack the “expertise to be able to steer that ship”, resulting in ineffective initiatives

<sup>24</sup> Rollett, S (2024) *The DNA of trust-led school improvement: a conceptual model*. Confederation of School Trusts.

and a failure to prioritize essential training. The consequences of inadequate expertise and training include compromised educational quality, inconsistent implementation of key strategies, and a general loss of confidence.

### 3.3.2 Research and evidence

Research and evidence captures the ways trust leaders draw on external knowledge, research-informed practice, and evaluative inquiry to shape, justify, and refine their improvement approaches.

#### Positive valence

**Evidence-informed improvement:** A number of trust leaders talked about how they use research and evidence to inform improvement approaches and to support staff. In one case this involved collaboration with a local university: "We've got student researchers, we've got staff starting looking at being critical analysts of research papers. And we're doing that across the trust. So, we're starting that criticality thing in the autumn. I think that piece of collaboration is really helpful because we're using academics from the university to support us, but it's very much our agenda." As this comment exposes, trust leaders spoke about the importance of discernment when it comes to using research, with several arguing that the sector has become better at integrating insights from research with their lived experiences. Trust leaders also spoke about evidence as a fulcrum for professional dialogue and, ultimately, shared direction setting: "each school's teaching and learning framework has been co-created by the entire staff within that school. And we've done it through a process of engaging with research and using their own expertise and ideas around what make great what makes great teaching. And obviously, I've filtered it through the research that we've read." The multifaceted approach to using research and evidence described by trust leaders underscores a dedication to fostering environments of continuous learning and improvement, grounded in both rigorous inquiry and collaborative engagement.

#### Negative valence

**Uncritical use of evidence:** As explored above, the interviews revealed a critical perspective on the use of evidence. Some trust leaders pointed to a tension between the ideal of evidence-based practice and the practical challenges of its implementation, arguing the evidence base in education is often "contested", "problematic," and "flawed". For some, this has led to a "healthier amount of scepticism" about its applicability across a range of contexts. There was, therefore, a sense in some responses that the pendulum has swung from a time when evidence was entirely disregarded to a point where it risked being overemphasized or treated without sufficient discernment. While none of the interviewees asserted that evidence-based practice was bad per se, their responses suggest a need for a more nuanced approach to evidence; one that acknowledges its limitations and incorporates contextual understanding. Without this the use of evidence was seen by some to be a constraint on school improvement.

**Superficial exemplars:** While many of the trust leaders talked positively

about how they draw on research and examples from across the sector to inform their work, a few shared a concern that examples of 'best practice' can sometimes turn out to be lacking in substance. Some expressed a worry that superficial presentations and "shiny" approaches overshadow genuine, sustainable impact. As one remarked, the emphasis on "bombast and testosterone and ego" in discussions about school improvement further highlights the concern that style and publicity can be valued more than the actual work and its impact. This can lead to a situation where, as one leader put it, "those who shout loudest tend to get heard the most", potentially marginalizing more substantive, but less flashy, efforts. This concern reinforces the point made above that trust leaders engaging with research and evidence about trust-led school improvement must undertake sufficient discernment. It also raises questions about how this dynamic might affect sector efforts to build knowledge about effective practices.

### 3.3.3 Quality assurance (QA)

Quality assurance denotes the systems, processes, and routines used to evaluate school performance, diagnose strengths and weaknesses, and inform subsequent improvement work.

#### Positive valence

**Collaborative quality assurance and data:** Leaders described a range of mechanisms they used to assess school and student strengths and weaknesses in order to inform improvement activity. Data plays a crucial role according to some trust leaders, with several giving a sense of it being 'done with' rather than 'done to' school leaders.

In some trusts schools utilize data to track student progress against targets. Another trust leader described quality assurance reviews that are conducted collaboratively, guided by established principles to ensure transparency: "So, reviews, yes, but done in a really collaborative way using our principles so that there's not like, it's not a secret to what we're looking for. These are our principles." Consequently, the process of review described by this leader was both a way of assessing quality and embedding shared understandings across the staff. This was echoed by another trust leader too, who said "doing much of it together too, because today we had our primary principals together and we were doing a quality assurance panel and we were just asking them together to talk to us about their SATs outcomes, about what their analysis told us, what they were learning from that. And actually the power of having them in a room, doing that together rather than going to each school and checking individually, meant that you just in that meeting you're immediately like cross fertilising in terms of what the most impactful interventions were."

One trust leader spoke about the benefits of undertaking external reviews, such as those from Challenge Partners, which were valued for providing best practices and stimulating a positive environment for sharing and development. To borrow a well-worn educational assessment phrase, the sort of quality assurance work described by these trust leaders might be thought of as 'formative' as much as 'summative.'

## Negative valence

**Over reliance on quality assurance:** Several leaders express dissatisfaction with approaches that place too much weight on quality assurance and external evaluations, such as those resembling or preparing for Ofsted inspections, over genuine, collaborative improvement efforts. This is seen as fostering a “deficit model” where the focus is on identifying weaknesses rather than leveraging existing strengths within schools. Some leaders criticize the superficiality and lack of support associated with legacy school improvement methods, with one leader describing them as “bullshit conversations” centred on data and targets, devoid of pastoral care or meaningful engagement. The segments highlight a desire for more peer-based, approaches to quality assurance and use of data. There was also a call for trust leaders to provide solutions and support alongside challenges, fostering a sense of achievable improvement rather than central trust staff acting as an “inspectorate”, in part because, as some trust leaders argued, Ofsted inspections capture a narrow view of quality in any case. Ultimately, the segments suggest trust leaders felt there is a need for QA work to shift from top-down, quasi-inspection approaches to more collaborative and holistic models that prioritize support.

### 3.3.4 Organisational strategy

Organisational strategy encompasses the structures, strategies, priorities, and resource allocations through which trusts seek to create the conditions for coherent and sustainable improvement.

## Positive valence

**Intentional organisational design:** This was about trust leaders deliberately creating the right supporting structures in the trust and its schools to facilitate improvement. CEOs in particular spoke about their work focusing on structures and agile deployment of staff. This included considering workforce design to attract post-millennial staff and moving towards team-based models. For one CEO this saw a move towards a structure that distributes responsibilities across a team rather than concentrating them in one person. One trust leader spoke about the formalising of internal support via by commissioning staff with specific expertise to work across schools, budgeting for their time and ensuring their release. Another spoke about an approach they adopted from another trust which uses ‘trust projects’ to set up initiatives led by an internal leader, thus helping to support their development. Others expressed a more organic, interwoven and agile model. HR, finance, and leadership structures are seen as significant elements that can either support or hinder school improvement.

**Managing complexity:** Rigorous prioritisation and a coherent strategy was seen as an important means of mitigating the complex challenges of trust-led school improvement. Some leaders emphasized the importance of an interconnected approach to school improvement, cautioning against the proliferation of isolated strategies. This was expressed particularly powerfully by one CEO, who said “the nature of a school is to be intensely interrelated... And so the more you can be clear about your values, the more, the better it is, but also the more that you can be systematic about ensuring that, for

example, most obviously, your assessment shouldn't be undermining the curriculum, the assessment should be supporting the curriculum." Effective communication was also seen as important, as was the need for efficient time management and collaboration among different stakeholders. Those leading school improvement had to ensure that the "right things happened at the right time" and that focus is maintained on the "main thing."

## Negative valence

**Weak prioritisation:** The interviews revealed a common struggle with prioritization and strategic focus within educational leadership. Leaders acknowledge the tendency to "try to do too many things", resulting in initiative overload and a lack of focus on activities that would "make the biggest difference". This is compounded by the difficulty many heads experience in "letting go of anything", leading to an accumulation of programs and initiatives without a clear understanding of their impact. The pressure to address urgent issues can also overshadow the importance of diagnosing underlying problems, leading to a focus on surface-level changes rather than addressing the "core root" of the issues. This ultimately results in schools becoming "lost" amidst a multitude of conflicting directives, with leaders feeling "disempowered" and struggling to implement changes effectively.

**Weak implementation:** The theme of implementation challenges was prominent across the interviews, particularly concerning new initiatives and reforms. One CEO expressed worry that schools which struggled with previous reforms will likely face similar challenges with new ones, suggesting a common weakness in implementation across the sector. This concern is echoed by another CEO, who highlights the difficulty organizations face following the selection of the right research-informed ideas in ensuring their effective implementation. Another leader observed that schools weren't implementing what they had agreed to, pointing to a disconnect between planning and execution. These challenges were, in some examples, further compounded by factors such as inadequate technology and cultural resistance to change. Ultimately, the issues raised illustrated the need for trust leaders to pay close attention not only to the design of strategy but also its rigorous implementation.

**Insufficient capacity:** Arguably linked with the notion of weak implementation (above), a lack of capacity was seen by several trust leaders as a barrier to delivering school improvement strategies. One CEO described how when their trust was smaller capacity was an acute challenge: "we didn't really have the capacity to draw upon centrally because there was only one other school." This is further echoed by a non-CEO executive leader who contrasts the opportunities available in larger schools with the struggles faced in smaller ones, particularly regarding teacher planning and subject knowledge. Similarly, another CEO reflects on the slower progress in a maintained school they have been supporting over a long period, suggesting that even with external assistance, improvements are gradual when internal capacity is a limiting factor.

**Insufficient sustainability:** Trust leaders raise concerns about the longevity and genuine impact of school improvement initiatives. One CEO noted that improvement efforts often yield short-term gains but fail to create lasting change, particularly when the departure of key personnel leads to a decline in

performance. This is echoed by a non-CEO executive leader who distinguishes between “performance” and true “improvement,” arguing that sustainable progress should be difficult to reverse and built upon solid foundations. Another CEO critiques the over-reliance on “crisis management improvement methodology,” which, while perhaps necessary and effective in the short term, neglects the holistic development of culture, partnerships, and long-term vision necessary for sustained success.

### 3.3.5 Leadership

Leadership refers to the behaviours and capabilities of senior leaders at trust and school level, which were widely viewed as pivotal in shaping the trajectory and culture of improvement.

#### Positive valence

**Catalysing leadership:** The importance of effective school leadership was one of the most talked about themes, with many interviewees emphasizing its crucial role in school improvement. Strong leadership is seen as a catalyst that permeates the entire school, influencing teachers, staff, and students alike. Interviewees suggest that the quality of senior leadership and the head of the school are critical determinants of success. One participant noted, “once you get leadership of the school right at the very highest level, everything else, it’s like a dye. It just drips through the school without anyone even knowing it”. This highlights the profound impact that effective leadership can have on creating a positive and thriving school environment. But that leadership is also seen to come from trust leaders too. Their ability to “connect people with purpose”, foster collaboration, and make sound decisions is also highlighted as essential for driving school improvement.

The interrelationship between school and trust leadership relationship was captured well by one leader, who said, “so much of leadership is about decision making...but the real key is you get the right person in place and you can be absolutely sure that...their regular decision making is going to be in line. And then you can put alongside them the checks and balances that are going to make those decisions more often the right thing.... And if they are, if they know what resource is available to them and what expertise is around them, they will draw in as they need to what they need, and they will hold it well.”

#### Negative valence

**Ineffective leadership:** The theme of ineffective leadership emerged as a critical factor hindering school improvement and overall trust effectiveness. Several participants highlighted how school leadership’s resistance to change can inhibit school improvement. In some cases when talking to their staff, school leaders describe changes in ways that indicate change is being instigated by ‘the trust’ rather than them. This was seen as unhelpful by some trust leaders, who argued that sort of division between ‘school’ and ‘trust’ was unhelpful when leading change, preferring instead a perspective from leaders that emphasised mutual endeavour and shared responsibility: “there is no Trust C. You are Trust C this. The schools are Trust C.” It is important to add that concerns about the deleterious effect of ineffective leadership were

not limited to school leadership. It was also seen to manifest as a “failure of governance” in some cases, marked by a lack of role definition, accountability, and appropriate oversight, ultimately impacting the quality of education.

### 3.3.6 Culture, vision and values

Culture, vision and values capture the shared norms, expectations, beliefs, and moral purposes that shape how improvement is understood, enacted, and experienced across the organisation.

#### Positive valence

**Shared culture, vision and values:** The importance of a clearly defined and actively managed culture within trusts and their schools is a recurring theme, and one of the most discussed elements of the school improvement levers. Interviewees emphasized that culture is not merely a set of values displayed on a wall, but a lived experience that permeates all aspects of the organization, from curriculum design to assessment and beyond. Leaders from trusts with a faith ethos spoke about how that ethos permeates their desired organisational culture: “how do we interpret that and put it within a culture which for us is a Catholic, you know, a strong kind of mission driven Catholic ethos. How do we make sure that we are warm, respectful? How do we make sure that these are kind places that where people feel loved and nurtured and everything else, not places where people come in and comply just because of fear?”

For some leaders, culture and values are the means through which shared priorities are enshrined and lived out, meaning there can be less reliance on more formal codification: “Values are, you know, joined up and we’re all kind of rowing in the same direction, despite the fact there’s not a kind of script or kind of playbook for that.” Furthermore, leaders’ comments suggest that a strong, well-defined culture is essential for attracting and retaining staff who align with the trust’s values fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose across the organization. A key point to emphasise is the deliberateness that leaders described, encapsulated by one CEO: “you’ve got to determine what your culture is going to be like.”

#### Negative valence

**Weak improvement culture:** A CEO shared an experience where a newly integrated school, despite initial due diligence, lacked a “culture of learning, reflection, putting the children first,” prioritizing staff comfort over student needs. This misalignment between espoused values and actual practice hindered improvement efforts, highlighting the critical role of cultural ‘fit’ in successful school improvement. Furthermore, the emotional toll of driving improvement is evident from some leaders’ experiences, with one executive leader noting the personal sacrifices made to move schools forward, while another describes the “traumatic” process of implementing new initiatives while navigating resistance to change. These narratives underscore the significance for trusts of considering both the tangible strategies and the intangible cultural elements when leading and managing trust-led school improvement.

**Low expectations:** The theme of low expectations could be seen as a subset of 'poor improvement culture' (above) but is isolated here because it was specifically mentioned by several trust leaders. Some trust leaders expressed concerns about comments they hear from educators that seem to imply lower expectations of groups of children, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is reflected in the experiences of one executive leader who contrasts the high expectations in London schools with the "much, much lower" expectations of staff experienced in the more rural area they now work in. This leader describes a complacency where schools might consider they are "doing well enough" without striving for optimal outcomes for their students. Tackling these issues was seen to be a big priority for some trust leaders because they feel such low expectations are a barrier to school improvement and improving children's outcomes.

**System pressures:** While not raised by all participants, a small number of trust leaders expressed concern that system pressures, for example those resulting from high stakes performance measures, could drive undesirable practices in some cases. These included concerns that school improvement initiatives may not sufficiently promote inclusivity as a result. Others described approaches where the policy drive for rapid school improvement meant that some schools are transformed quickly but with unintended consequences.

One CEO reflected more broadly on the nature of school improvement within a system where high stakes accountability can lead to competition, suggesting it can lead to a redistribution of expertise, capacity and pupils in unintended ways. While such views were not widely expressed, they are important in highlighting how trust-led improvement operates within an interconnected system, where changes in one school may have implications for others. Participants suggested that this places a responsibility on leaders to remain attentive to the wider system effects of their decisions.

### 3.3.7 Connectedness

Connectedness reflects the relationships, networks, and collaborative ties – within and beyond the trust – that support improvement efforts.

#### Positive valence

**Strong collaboration and networks:** A collaborative approach was cited by several as being a key enabler of improvement. In one sense this was about 'doing with' rather than 'doing to'. But it was also about the opportunity to unlock and catalyse professional learning. The creation of trust networks, including subject-based and thematic groups, facilitates the exchange of effective strategies among schools. These networks and communities, including "leadership networks" and "subject communities" are seen as impactful in bringing together individuals in similar roles to share knowledge and improve practices. The power of collaboration was seen to reach beyond the trust too, with some leaders describing the importance of connecting with various external agencies, such as social care, health services, and local authorities, especially for those children with SEMH needs.

## Negative valence

**Weak internal relationships:** Some interviewees spoke about instances of individuals in the trust operating in isolation, described as “people working in silos”, which hinders the sharing of knowledge and best practices. Furthermore, attempts to foster collaboration, such as “trust networking groups,” have been unsuccessful in some cases due to a lack of dedicated time, leadership, and expertise, ultimately failing to cultivate effective teamwork. The inefficiency of school improvement initiatives conducted on an individual basis, rather than a collective one, further underscores the challenges in establishing strong internal relationships. In one example, the failure of lead practitioner roles, designed to foster collaboration across schools, highlights the critical need for individuals to “feel connected day in, day out,” suggesting that transient or superficial connections are insufficient for building robust working relationships and a sense of belonging. These examples collectively illustrate how poor internal relationships can undermine collaboration, limit the impact of improvement efforts, and ultimately affect school improvement success.

**Weak external relationships:** As explored above, some interviewees expressed concern over competitiveness among trusts, suggesting it hinders sector-wide improvement. There’s a call for “shared knowledge” and “professional generosity,” yet some trusts are perceived as keeping knowledge to themselves, which is seen as “detrimental to the whole sector”. External relationships with local authorities can also be problematic, as illustrated by the experience of one trust being denied support for not adhering to a local authority’s preferred therapeutic approach to managing behaviour. There was also concern about the way managed moves operated in some local authorities, “kicking the can down the road”. On a broader point, one leader lamented the dominance of personalities in driving decision making locally and regionally: “there’s so much of what exists in the system is personality driven. And that’s a real shame.”

### 3.3.8 Commonality

Commonality refers to the degree of alignment, consistency, and shared practice across schools within a trust, often viewed by interviewees as a blend of standardisation, autonomy and agency in improvement work.

## Positive valence

**Alignment:** Leaders widely acknowledged the potential power of aligning, and in some cases centralising, certain approaches to drive school improvement across their trusts. This often involved implementing common frameworks, curricula, and systems, such as a single phonics programme. As explored above, alignment in some trusts is as much about culture and values, however, as it is about frameworks and curricula. Participants noted that alignment could lead to greater consistency in teaching, learning, behaviour standards, and curriculum delivery. However, as explored below, they also recognised the need to balance standardisation with contextualisation and responsiveness to individual school needs. This balance was felt to be different when dealing with schools in crisis, where a more directive leadership style was generally accepted as necessary.

Some trust leaders said they had, over time, become more in favour of closer alignment within a trust. However, this was not always as a result of central teams asserting more control, sometimes being rooted in collaboration and professional dialogue instead. As one leader remarked, "This is like alignment through collaborative convergence, isn't it? That you discuss it and then you end up all coming to the same conclusion because you've discussed it together and everyone's worked in that way. So yeah, I would say, for example, we didn't start off by saying that, I don't know, everyone's going to have a behaviour curriculum in their schools. We started off by saying what are the principles of great behaviour leadership?. One of them is that we explicitly teach children behavioural expectations and routines. And then it's like, okay, so how will we achieve that in our schools? And then it's like, oh, we should probably all just have a behaviour curriculum then. And then it's like, well, should we all just plan our own behaviour curriculum or should we just work together to plan a behaviour curriculum? Oh, we'll probably just work together to plan a behaviour curriculum."

**Codification:** Closely related to the theme of aligning, codification is teased out here because several leaders spoke about it discretely. Codification involves making practices explicit and clearly laid out, ensuring everyone understands "how we do things around here". This approach is seen as a means of aligning practices and driving consistency. While some express reservations about adopting uniform practices (explored below), codification was viewed by many interviewees as crucial for improving standards and establishing a shared culture. Some said it also reduces the burden on individuals.

**De-centralisation:** Curiously, although greater alignment (and in some cases centralisation) was seen by some trust leaders as a desirable aim, others rejected the premise of greater centralisation and argued a process of decentralisation - or at least rejecting greater centralisation - was necessary to support school improvement. While many interviewees highlighted the importance of trust-wide alignment in terms of overarching objectives, some argued for greater freedom of individual expression and context-specific action. The emphasis on fostering self-management and distributing leadership, leaders said, was to enable those closest to the situation to solve problems, promoting collaboration and agility within the organization. One CEO summarised it by saying, "my view is very much...that leaders should set the contexts that enable action. They shouldn't command and try and control their people."

**Modelling:** Trust leaders spoke about having a 'model' that codifies and supports consistency in their approach to school improvement. In some cases these models involve distinct phases, such as "stabilize," "reinvent," and "grow," to guide schools through a "continuous journey of improvement". Some trust leaders emphasised the importance of aligning schools with a core approach while also tailoring support to individual school needs. A key element of these models is explaining the 'why' behind changes and expectations to staff, students, and families to ensure buy-in and consistency. Furthermore, the strategic deployment of experienced staff, like headteachers, to support and mentor colleagues in other schools is seen as being facilitated by the existence of trust improvement strategy.

## Negative valence

**Imbalanced centralisation/decentralisation:** The theme of balancing centralisation and decentralisation emerged as a critical tension with various leaders expressing concern about the potential pitfalls of both extremes. Some CEOs highlight the dangers of excessive standardisation, which can stifle innovation, limit the agency of individual schools and teachers, and ultimately lead to stagnation or regression. Some advocated for a model that balances high alignment with sufficient autonomy, recognising the psychological need for agency among colleagues. Others caution against the risks of granting autonomy too quickly, potentially leading to misalignment and sub-optimal practices creeping in, hindering children's progress. The key is seen to reside in finding the "right balance" that empowers individuals while ensuring accountability and a shared vision across the trust. Getting this wrong in either direction is regarded as a significant constraint on a trust's ability to lead and maintain improvement. The fact that there appears to be deeply contrasting views about the right approach to centralisation/decentralisation illustrates a key area of debate in the system. It also suggests there isn't a single answer to the problem, or at least one that is accepted across the sector.

**Insufficient modelling:** A couple of interviewees indicated that previous school improvement efforts had been undermined by the lack of a clear or effective model of improvement: "the primary schools hadn't been involved at all. So, it was just a secondary model. And it was pretty outdated."

**Insufficient contextual adaptation:** Whereas some interviewees expressed support for the notion of a trust-wide school improvement model, others expressed concern over the "disempowering nature" of imposing practices without considering the specific needs and relationships within a school. There was a view from some that what works in a high-performing environment, achieved through years of dedicated effort, may not be easily transferable. Ultimately, these comments suggest that school improvement could be undermined or ineffective if it is premised on simply replicating existing models from elsewhere.

**Weak codification:** A few CEOs shared concerns regarding the codification of school improvement practices. On the one hand, a CEO noted that improvement is difficult to achieve without clear success criteria, pointing out the common issue of activities lacking defined assessment criteria. On the other hand, another CEO worried about "the extrapolation and then the low-level codification" of practices. This juxtaposition exposes the slightly paradoxical position that school improvement efforts could be undermined both because codification has not taken and because it has. The quality of codification, therefore, is likely to be as important as the existence of it.

## Levers in summary

All eight levers emerged as multi valenced and context dependent mechanisms rather than straightforward tools.

Lever	Positive Valence	Negative Valence
Staff expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effective CPD</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inadequate staff expertise and training</li> </ul>
Research and evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evidence-informed improvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uncritical use of evidence</li> <li>Superficial exemplars</li> </ul>
Quality assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborative QA and data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Over reliance on QA</li> </ul>
Organisational strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intentional organisational design</li> <li>Managing complexity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Weak prioritisation</li> <li>Weak implementation</li> <li>Insufficient capacity</li> <li>Insufficient sustainability</li> </ul>
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Catalysing leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ineffective leadership</li> </ul>
Culture, vision and values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shared culture, vision and values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Weak improvement culture</li> <li>Low expectations</li> <li>System pressures</li> </ul>
Connectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong collaboration and networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Weak internal relationships</li> <li>Weak external relationships</li> </ul>
Commonality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alignment</li> <li>Codification</li> <li>De-centralisation</li> <li>Modelling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Imbalanced centralisation/ decentralisation</li> <li>Insufficient modelling</li> <li>Insufficient contextual adaptation</li> <li>Weak codification</li> </ul>

Their enactment could strengthen or weaken improvement work depending on a range of complex factors. This valenced treatment highlights that trust led school improvement is not simply a matter of selecting the 'right' levers, but of understanding how leaders activate them within particular organisational and school improvement contexts. As such, it is useful to think about the levers as a suite of controls that require careful calibration rather than a set of binary decisions to be made.

## 4. Discussion

This study explores how fourteen school trust executives understand and enact trust-led school improvement. It analyses the aims they articulate, the objects of improvement they prioritise, and the levers they deploy in pursuit of those aims. In doing so, it presents improvement practice as an exercise in strategic professional judgement rather than a merely managerial or technical process.

The accounts offered by participants are shaped both by their organisational contexts and by their own professional biographies. Improvement is therefore not described as a uniform model, but as situated practice – interpreted and enacted in ways that reflect local conditions, histories, and values.

By foregrounding the reasoning of trust leaders themselves, the analysis provides new insight into the complexity of trust-level improvement. It highlights dimensions that are often underexplored in the literature, which tends to privilege organisation- or system-level explanations. Instead, this study attends to trust leaders as agents of practice, whose decisions and judgements actively shape how improvement is conceived and realised.

### 4.1 Beyond compliance: diverse aims, layered responsibilities

The leaders in this study articulated a multi dimensional palette of aims – institutional, child centred, professional centred, and (for some trusts) faith oriented – rarely reducing improvement to accountability metrics alone. Notably, only a small fraction of aim related segments referenced Ofsted, underscoring executives’ broader educational ambitions. At the same time, role proximity mattered: CEOs leaned toward institutional coherence and organisational conditions, whereas non CEOs more often foregrounded classroom proximate ends such as pedagogy, literacy, and children’s lived experience. These patterned differences suggest that trust level improvement is distributed by design: leaders at different tiers carry distinct but complementary aims across the system.

### 4.2 Anchors of improvement: culture, pedagogy and leadership

Leaders positioned culture – notably behaviour, attitudes, and staff norms – as a foundational object that conditions the success of subsequent improvement work. Many described sequencing change by addressing culture, especially pupil behaviour, first. The pedagogy-curriculum nexus was the second anchor: leaders emphasised teaching quality, curriculum, and the teacher’s subject and instructional expertise as central to improvement. Together with leadership, which interviewees treated as both a target and a driver of improvement, these formed the core triad of routinely prioritised objects.



### 4.3 Objects and levers: a recursive relationship

A number of categories in this analysis – most notably leadership and culture – appear in the data both as objects of improvement (the things leaders aim to change) and as levers of improvement (the means through which they pursue change). Rather than signalling a flaw in the analytic framework, this overlap reflects an important feature of trust-led improvement itself: these domains are inherently recursive, shaping and being shaped by improvement activity. For example, leaders frequently described the development of school leadership as a priority in its own right, while also positioning leadership behaviours as the mechanism through which culture, teaching quality, and organisational strategy are enacted. Similarly, culture was identified both as a target for change – particularly in relation to pupil behaviour, expectations, and staff norms – and as the vehicle through which alignment, implementation, and values are reinforced across schools. Professional development, too, operates simultaneously as an outcome to be strengthened and as a lever that enables improvements in pedagogy, curriculum, and inclusion.

These recursive dynamics suggest that in complex organisations like trusts, certain domains carry both instrumental and constitutive roles: leaders must improve them and rely on them to deliver improvement elsewhere and to make it sustainable.

Recognising this dual status enriches rather than complicates the analysis, highlighting that trust-level improvement is not a linear or single-directional process but a system of interdependent conditions in which some elements act as both ends and means.

### 4.4 Levers as valenced, context dependent mechanisms

A central contribution of this study is to show that the eight identified levers are not inherently “good” or “bad” techniques but valenced mechanisms whose effects depend on conditions and enactment. Leaders consistently described each lever in positive and negative terms (enabling vs. constraining), making the case for lever valence as an analytic construct rather than treating levers as neutral instruments. Lever valence, as operationalised in this study, was coded from participants’ evaluative language, attributions of effect, and mechanism descriptions – aligning with the study’s interpretive approach.

### 4.5 Conditions under which levers are believed to “work” (or not)

The analysis indicates that participants believe valence turns on recognisable conditions:

- Staff expertise is effective when high quality CPD builds subject and pedagogical knowledge across schools; it turns negative when expertise is thin, fidelity is superficial, or roles outstrip capability.
- Research and evidence enable improvement when critically mediated and, in some cases, locally co constructed; they constrain when treated as de contextualised “best practice” or as performative style over substance.
- Quality assurance is valuable diagnostically – especially when collaborative and transparent – but can foster a deficit orientation and compliance behaviours if over weighted or quasi inspectorial.
- Organisational strategy enables when priorities are few, coherent, and resourced; it constrains when initiative overload, weak implementation, or insufficient capacity undercut sustainability.
- Leadership catalyses improvement when the “right person” exercises sound, connected decision making; it constrains when misaligned, resistant, or

obscured by governance failure.

- Culture, vision and values enable when lived (not sloganised) and explicitly stewarded; they constrain where expectations are low, staff comfort is prioritised over children's benefit, or unethical practices distort the system.
- Connectedness enables through strong internal communities and productive external ties; it constrains when silos persist, partnerships are fragile, or local politics displace sound professional judgement.
- Commonality is perhaps the most contested lever: alignment and codification can reduce unhelpful variation and scale effective practice, yet over standardisation can suppress agency and blunt contextual responsiveness; getting the balance of commonality right is a central concern of trust leaders, several of whom indicated their perspective on this has a degree of transience. This is, therefore, an area that is likely to require ongoing work to attend to.

## 4.6 Differences between CEOs and non-CEOs

Although there was a lot of agreement between CEOs and non-CEOs, there were areas of difference identified in the aspects of school improvement the groups focused on. Interpretation should be cautious as it's not appropriate to conclude through thematic analysis that an item reported with higher frequency necessarily denotes greater importance (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, such patterns at least raise questions about whether and why higher frequency items might convey meaning, which could be the focus of future research.

In terms of the levers, CEOs seemed to emphasise the following areas with relatively more frequency than non-CEOs: commonality, quality assurance and organisational strategy. Whereas non-CEOs tended to focus more on staff expertise, connectedness, and research and evidence. No interpretation of this is offered here beyond the tentative observation that such differences could reflect the nature of the work undertaken by CEOs and other executive leaders.

## 4.7 Concreteness and abstraction

One of the interesting differentiators in trust leaders' responses is the extent of concreteness and specificity in their descriptions. While some tended to speak in abstract ways, others gave more concrete examples and pointed to specific instances that exemplify the point they were making. This wasn't only about differences between leaders, but also about the issue in question. For example, when talking about the levers of improvement, comments about culture often sat in the abstract, referring to the existence of a shared culture values, or its importance in relation to successful school improvement, but without necessarily specifying what that culture is or should be. In contrast, comments about staff expertise gave concrete examples of specific practices, such as the teaching of phonics.

Other research suggests the extent of abstraction and context dependency of meaning is might to carry important signals about whether and how knowledge builds in discourses.<sup>25</sup> This raises the possibility that the way trust leaders talk about their improvement work, specifically with regards to abstraction and context dependency, might have implications for how knowledge about such practices builds within and between trusts. This is a novel and interesting area for future research to explore.

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<sup>25</sup> Maton, K (2013) 'Making semantic waves: A key to cumulative knowledge-building', *Linguistics and Education*, 24(1), 8-22; Maton (2014).

## 4.8 Contribution to existing literature

Encouragingly, the levers share some similarities with extant research about trusts, such as Greany and McGinity's (2021) 'sustainable school improvement at scale: five strategic areas' and 'five improvement fundamentals', which points to areas such as vision and values, assessment, curriculum, and pedagogy, deploying and supporting leadership. However, as exemplified through their subsequent typology of trusts, their object of study is primarily the institutional perspective on school improvement rather than that of individual leaders.

There are strengths to taking an institutional view - it helps to mitigate the risk that individual trust leader perspectives may not be reflected in actual trust practices. However, by the same token, it also risks collapsing the complexity of practices within trusts by establishing 'the trust view', when it is plausible that perspectives and practice might differ within trusts, even in those which ostensibly appear to be heavily standardised. Moreover, it risks concealing aspects of how such practices become established and legitimated within trusts and the wider sector. For example, are preferred practices adopted by trusts simply on the basis of the CEO's direction? If not, what other considerations come into play? And if so, what factors shape the approaches CEOs wish to adopt with the organisation? This complexity illustrates why conceiving of trust practices as professional practices located with a field may bring about new insight into the approaches to school improvement trusts follow.

This study makes a contribution to understanding such practices by analysing the aims, objects and levers of those responsible for leading trust-led school improvement in trusts.

## 5. Conclusion

In conceptual terms, the study contributes a new framework (aims-objects-levers) that positions trust-led school improvement as a dynamic practice of calibration led by trust leaders operating as agentic practitioners situated within complex contexts.

By introducing lever valence and showing how the same mechanism can alternate between enabling and constraining effects, the analysis offers an alternative to instrumental accounts of school improvement in trusts and instead foregrounds the conditions under which improvement efforts acquire traction.

Practically, the findings encourage trust leaders to treat levers as contingent tools whose value must be continually assessed, rather than as inherently effective interventions. This places a premium on diagnostic capability, disciplined prioritisation, ethical awareness, and attentiveness to organisational learning.

As the trust landscape continues to evolve, the framework developed here offers both a vocabulary and an analytic lens for considering how improvement work is enacted, adapted, and sustained across groups of schools, and for identifying the leadership practices that make positive valence more likely.



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# School Improvement Hub

CST and ImpactEd Group are working together to collate examples of school improvement practices used by trusts, freely shared to help schools across the country. If your trust has work that aligns with our conceptual framework for trust-led improvement, please visit the website for details of how to work with us to develop and share a case study, and help all our schools to keep getting better.

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