

**Platform governance, normative power and teacher agency:
a critical realist study of digital management in English
secondary schools**

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Declaration

This is to certify that

- (i) The author of this thesis declares that it does not include work forming part of a thesis presented successfully for another degree,
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Abstract

This thesis examines how digital platforms shape power relations in the management of teachers in English secondary schools, and how teachers interpret, negotiate, resist and at times actively support or innovate within these developments. This study addresses a significant gap in research on school contexts: the absence of empirically grounded, mechanism-based accounts of how digital infrastructures acquire governing force within school organisations. In particular, studies of schools have paid insufficient attention to the normative dimensions of platform governance, including the combined role of teacher groupings, spatial arrangements and institutional cultures, despite their relevance to both the management and digital-governance literatures.

The thesis adopts a comparative qualitative design, drawing on a critical realist theoretical framework that integrates Bhaskar's stratified ontology, Archer's morphogenetic approach, Elder-Vass's norm circle theory and selected aspects of Foucauldian governmentality as a lens on relational and soft power dynamics. This combination is justified by a specific gap in the literature on digital governance in schools: whilst research on schools as complex organisations exists, studies of digital governance have tended to foreground technological infrastructures or policy frameworks in ways that under-theorise relational power and leave the meso-level processes through which teacher groupings, spatial arrangements and institutional systems interact over time largely unexamined. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews at two English secondary schools: a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) academy characterised by centralised authority and intensive platform-based oversight, and a Local Authority-maintained school (LA school) marked by leadership instability and platform governance that was contested and variably enacted across settings. Analysis followed a five-stage process combining open coding, retroductive inference, stratified explanation and morphogenetic synthesis, itself an original methodological contribution to critical realist studies of schools as organisations.

The findings show that comparable digital systems produced markedly different patterns of oversight and teacher experience across the two settings. Aligned norm circles, groupings of social actors whose shared normative commitments shape practice, and stable leadership in the MAT school enabled platform governance to consolidate into a largely morphostatic regime of visibility and compliance. In the LA school, dispersed normative alignment and leadership instability left platform oversight fragmented and open to reinterpretation. Teacher agency also took different forms across the two cases: in the MAT school it was largely channelled into selective compliance, whilst in the LA school it tended towards reinterpretation and informal resistance, a finding that challenges determinist accounts in which the governed play no constitutive role in outcomes.

The thesis makes three original contributions. It reconceptualises platform governance as an emergent form of normative power, rather than a purely technical or surveillance-driven

phenomenon. It operationalises norm circles as a meso-level explanatory mechanism within critical realist analysis, deploying them as a comparative diagnostic device within educational governance, a use not previously developed in the literature, and extending the reach of Elder-Vass's framework into school organisations as sites of digital management. It also extends Organisation Studies and HRM scholarship by treating schools as organisations and demonstrating how digitalisation reorganises management control and teachers' work through processes of normative mediation, rather than through platform properties alone. The thesis will be of interest to critical realist researchers, organisation studies and HRM scholars, and professionals and policymakers with responsibility for digital governance in educational settings.

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List of abbreviations

Term	Full term / definition
A-level	Advanced Level qualification
AI	Artificial Intelligence
BSA	British Sociological Association
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CEPs	Cultural Emergent Properties
COVID-19	Coronavirus pandemic (from 2020)
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CPOMS	Child Protection Online Management System
CR	Critical Realism
DBS	Disclosure and Barring Service
DfE	Department for Education
EdTech	Educational technology
ELP	Elmwood Learning Partnership (Matson Academy governing body)
Evolve	Platform for managing school trips and risk assessments
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
Go4Schools (G4S)	Behaviour, assessment and attendance tracking platform
HET	Highcrest Education Trust (former Trust of Matson Academy)
HR	Human Resources
HRM	Human Resource Management
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IT	Information Technology
LA	Local Authority

Larwood School	Pseudonym for second case study school
LAT	Local Authority Trust (involved in the merger leading to ELP)
LEA	Local Education Authority (historic governance term)
LMS	Local Management of Schools
M/M	Morphogenetic Model (Archer)
MAT	Multi-Academy Trust
Matson Academy	Pseudonym for case study school 1
MIS	Management Information System
NCs	Norm circles
NEU	National Education Union
NPM	New Public Management
OCR	Original Critical Realism
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PEPs	Personal Emergent Properties
PPA	Planning, Preparation and Assessment (non-contact time)
SEPs	Structural Emergent Properties
SIMS	School Information Management System
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
SOS (TeamSOS)	Emergency communication and incident-management platform
T ₁ / T ₂ –T ₃ / T ₄	Stages of the morphogenetic cycle
Teams	Microsoft Teams
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
Unifrog	Careers and destinations guidance platform
UpLearn	Online A-level learning platform

Glossary

Analytical dualism – Margaret Archer’s methodological principle of holding structure/culture and agency analytically apart over time so their interplay can be examined, thereby avoiding conflation.

Calculative practices – Rendering activity measurable and governable through the translation of work into standardised indicators that enable comparison.

Central conflation – Treating structure, culture and agency as inseparable, thereby obscuring how pre-existing conditions shape action and how outcomes emerge over time. Avoided in this thesis through Archer’s morphogenetic approach and a stratified critical realist ontology.

Causal mechanisms – Relatively enduring generative processes that, in particular contexts, produce tendencies towards certain outcomes.

Critical realism (CR) – A philosophical approach asserting that reality is stratified, that social phenomena are generated by underlying mechanisms, and that explanation requires identifying how such mechanisms operate in context rather than relying solely on observable correlations.

Cultural Emergent Properties (CEPs) – Relatively enduring cultural features (such as shared norms, values and expectations) that possess causal influence and condition social action.

Datafication – The transformation of social practices into quantifiable data that can be stored, analysed and mobilised for governance, comparison and control.

Datafixation – A cultural logic that elevates quantifiable indicators above contextual, relational and professional judgment, contributing to the narrowing of what counts as legitimate knowledge in schools.

Digital governance – The use of digital platforms, data infrastructures and forms of data-driven oversight to shape organisational behaviour, decision-making and professional conduct.

Digital platforms – The umbrella term used in this thesis for the software infrastructures through which schools organise administration, teaching, communication and performance monitoring. This includes MIS, classroom and communication platforms, and performance-tracking systems.

Disciplinary techniques – Regulation of conduct through hierarchical observation, judgment against norms and examination.

Downward causation – The influence of social structures and norm circles on individuals by shaping expectations of acceptable conduct and constraining available courses of action.

EdTech – The wider educational technology sector, including commercial providers, products, policy initiatives and market actors involved in the digitisation of education.

Generative mechanisms – See *Causal mechanisms*.

Governmentality – The Foucauldian conception of governing as the ‘conduct of conduct’: the rationalities, techniques and forms of knowledge through which conduct is shaped, at a distance, so that individuals come to regulate themselves in line with institutional objectives.

Management Information Systems (MIS) – A subset of school digital platforms concerned primarily with administrative, statutory and data-management functions, including pupil records, attendance, timetabling, reporting and census-related processes.

Morphogenesis – Processes through which structural and cultural conditions are transformed over time through social interaction.

Morphostasis – Processes through which structural and cultural conditions are reproduced or stabilised over time.

Morphogenetic Model (M/M) – Archer’s analytical framework examining how structure, culture and agency interact across time (T_1 – T_4), enabling analysis of change and stability without conflation.

Norm circles (NCs) – Groups of people who collectively endorse, sustain and enforce norms through approval, disapproval and modelling, generating meso-level normative power.

Normative power – The capacity of norms, sustained through norm circles, to shape expectations, constrain behaviour and influence action independently of formal authority.

Open systems – The assumption that social systems are shaped by multiple interacting mechanisms whose effects vary by context.

Panopticon / panopticism – Foucault’s metaphor (after Bentham) for a disciplinary arrangement in which the possibility of constant, asymmetrical observation induces self-regulation; panopticism refers to the generalisation of this logic of visibility as a mode of control.

Personal Emergent Properties (PEPs) – Relatively enduring personal capacities and concerns (such as reflexivity, commitments and priorities) through which individuals interpret and respond to structural and cultural conditions.

Platform governance – The contingent organisational pattern through which digital platforms become embedded in the regulation of school life. In this thesis, platform governance does not refer to governance structures alone, but to the way digital infrastructures, organisational arrangements, normative expectations and reflexive responses interact to shape oversight, evaluation and everyday practices of teachers' work.

Platform power – The capacity of digital platforms to shape organisational routines, participation and governance priorities through their technical architectures, data practices and embedded logics.

Platformisation – The expansion of multi-purpose digital platforms into core organisational processes, producing new forms of coordination, visibility and managerial oversight.

Reflexivity – The internal deliberative process through which individuals evaluate concerns, priorities and possible courses of action in relation to their circumstances.

Retroduction – A mode of inference that moves from observed patterns to theorising about underlying mechanisms capable of generating them.

Situational logics – In Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach, the directional pressures (towards protection, elimination, compromise or opportunism) that pre-existing structural and cultural configurations exert on agents, conditioning but not determining action.

Socio-technical – The combination of digital platforms, organisational routines and governance processes through which work is coordinated and overseen in schools.

Spatio-material reconfiguration – Changes to school space and material arrangements that condition interaction, collegiality and day-to-day practice.

Structural Emergent Properties (SEPs) – Relatively enduring organisational or institutional features that possess causal influence and condition action.

Stratified ontology – The view that reality comprises the empirical (experienced), the actual (events and processes) and the real (underlying mechanisms).

Subjectivation – Processes through which individuals are constituted as subjects and come to govern themselves in relation to institutional norms, truths and evaluative practices.

Surveillance – The systematic monitoring of activity through digital or organisational means, producing visibility that can be mobilised for governance and control.

Tactical resistance – Localised, low-visibility practices through which teachers adapt, reinterpret or selectively ignore platform demands without openly challenging authority.

Teacher agency – Teachers' capacity to act and make choices within structural and cultural conditions, mediated by reflexivity and available resources.

Upward causation – The contribution of aggregated individual actions to the reproduction or transformation of social structures and norms.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and context

‘Scientifically significant generality does not lie on the face of the world, but in the hidden essences of things.’ (Roy Bhaskar, A Realist Theory of Science, 2008a[1975]:217).

This thesis examines the rapid expansion and consolidation of digital platforms in English state-maintained secondary schools and considers how these developments reshape organisational governance and teacher–manager power relations. The integration of digital systems into school life is not simply treated as a technical adjustment, it reflects a deeper organisational transformation connected to wider political and institutional shifts. Over recent decades English schooling has been reorganised through neoliberal education reforms and the managerial logics associated with New Public Management (NPM).¹ A central development has been the conversion of many schools into academies operating outside direct local authority control. The resulting system has intensified performance monitoring and encouraged market-oriented forms of accountability. Data now occupies a far more prominent role in school management. In such conditions, the spread of digital governance infrastructures has been readily accommodated.

Within this environment, an important question concerns whether platform technologies extend managerial visibility and subtly reshape relations of authority within schools. Their significance may not lie in the introduction of entirely new mechanisms of control. Rather, digital systems may embed existing accountability practices more deeply into everyday organisational routines. Processes that once relied on periodic observation or paper-based reporting can become mediated through dashboards, generated reports and automated alerts that make aspects of teaching activity visible on a more continuous basis. In this way, the everyday conduct of teaching may become more continuously visible and more readily open to intervention.

Although digital platforms were already gaining traction before the global pandemic, particularly through management information systems and virtual learning environments, the events of 2020 dramatically accelerated their uptake (Williamson and Hogan, 2021). When schools were forced into remote learning, platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Google Classroom quickly became the infrastructure through which teaching was delivered. What began as an emergency response

¹ Education policy is a devolved matter in the United Kingdom; this study therefore focuses specifically on the English secondary sector rather than UK education as a whole.

soon became institutionalised. One senior leader in this study remarked that ‘the pandemic lit the touch paper’ for digital transformation in his school, compressing changes that might previously have unfolded over several years into a matter of weeks. When classrooms reopened, these systems remained embedded in organisational routines. Homework submission platforms, behaviour-tracking systems and assessment dashboards continued to shape everyday practice. As a result, contemporary secondary teachers increasingly work within a highly mediated environment in which face-to-face interaction sits alongside platform-based monitoring and data reporting.

This local acceleration of digital governance forms part of a broader shift in the political economy of educational technology. During the pandemic the education sector became what UNESCO (2023) describes as a ‘site of intense financial activity and speculation’, as private EdTech firms experienced rapid growth in investment and user adoption. Large technology companies consolidated their presence in education while responding to the urgent demand for remote learning infrastructure (Williamson, Eynon and Potter, 2020). A small number of dominant providers, including Google, Microsoft and Apple, expanded their reach while a wider ecosystem of specialist firms developed around them. The resulting market increasingly displays a winner-takes-most dynamic, with a limited number of platforms becoming embedded across the schools sector.

The implications extend beyond commercial competition. When core educational processes depend on privately developed digital infrastructures, elements of governance begin to shift away from public institutions towards platform providers. Scholars increasingly describe this phenomenon as platform power: the capacity of digital infrastructures to shape participation and influence organisational priorities through their technical design. From this perspective EdTech platforms cannot be treated as neutral tools that schools simply deploy. Their architecture embeds assumptions about data capture, standardisation, monitoring and coordination. These systems structure interaction and translate activity into data flows. In doing so they subtly influence how teaching work becomes organised and interpreted within schools.

For teachers and school leaders, these developments present both opportunities and challenges. Digital platforms are frequently associated with practical efficiencies and easier coordination of everyday tasks. They are often understood to support streamlined homework tracking, behaviour logging and attendance monitoring, alongside quicker access to pupil records and progress indicators used in routine monitoring and coordination across departments. School leaders also emphasise the organisational clarity that platforms appear to offer. Dashboards bring together information that had previously been scattered across departments or paper records. Homework completion rates and behaviour incidents can be reviewed more quickly through management reports generated from platform data. Within the managerial language of NPM, such visibility is frequently interpreted as strengthening accountability and enabling quicker intervention when problems emerge.

Yet these same developments may also contain a more troubling dimension. Systems that simplify coordination can expand the capacity for surveillance and disciplinary oversight. As digital infrastructures render classroom activity more visible, teaching can begin to appear as a sequence of measurable outputs open to continuous scrutiny. Tools such as online markbooks or behaviour-tracking interfaces may reduce administrative workload, but they also create new conditions in which performance indicators can be used in evaluative and potentially punitive ways. Such developments recall Ball's (2003) analysis of performative governance, where professional practice becomes increasingly organised around measurable indicators. When teachers' work is interpreted primarily through dashboard metrics, dimensions of teacher judgment and relational labour can become less perceptible within daily school practice.

These dynamics suggest that digital platforms are not simply technical additions to existing organisational arrangements. They participate in the reconfiguration of power relations within schools. Visibility expands, the daily activity of teachers becomes more easily quantified and the space for discretionary judgment is increasingly conditioned by data alerts and managerial monitoring. The tension between oversight and professional autonomy therefore sits at the centre of the problem explored in this thesis.

English secondary schooling in the post-2020 COVID-19 pandemic period can therefore be understood as occupying a critical juncture. Platformisation has advanced rapidly within a system already shaped by decades of neoliberal reform and data-driven accountability. The interaction between technological infrastructures and existing governance arrangements has produced a complicated organisational picture. Digital systems promise improved coordination, whilst also intensifying forms of monitoring that may narrow established forms of teacher agency.

The central concern of this study is how platform power takes shape within everyday school practice and how teachers respond as reflexive agents. It asks how digital platforms restructure managerial oversight and the nature of teachers' work; why these processes unfold differently across school contexts and governance arrangements; and how teachers interpret and respond to being governed through data. Although a growing body of scholarship critiques educational datafication and the expansion of EdTech, relatively few empirical studies examine how digital governance is experienced and negotiated inside English secondary schools. This thesis addresses that gap through a comparative critical realist analysis of two contrasting institutional settings.

In pursuing this analysis, the study is concerned less with digital platforms as discrete technological artefacts than with the organisational conditions through which they acquire governing force. Platform governance is therefore treated as an emergent configuration rather than a fixed institutional arrangement. Its operation depends on how digital infrastructures become aligned with leadership priorities and existing hierarchies within particular schools.

Although the project began with an interest in the rapid post-pandemic expansion of educational technology, the analysis soon suggested that the most consequential developments were organisational rather than technological. The importance of digital platforms lay not primarily in the tools themselves but in how they reshaped everyday authority relations and altered the conditions under which teachers' conduct became visible and evaluated. The thesis therefore moves beyond the question of technology adoption to examine how platforms become embedded within the governance of school life. Platformisation is approached as a transformation in the organisation and direction of schooling, particularly in the ways expectations surrounding teachers' everyday work become stabilised.

Throughout the thesis, I use the term 'digital platforms' as shorthand for the software infrastructures through which schools organise administration, teaching, communication and performance monitoring. This includes legacy management information systems such as SIMS² and Go4Schools³; platforms adopted during the pandemic, such as Google Classroom⁴ and Microsoft Teams⁵; and emerging systems marketed as 'all-encompassing' cloud MIS platforms, such as Satchel One⁶ and Arbor⁷. I reserve the term 'EdTech' for discussion of the wider commercial sector and policy discourse within which these systems are developed and promoted.

1.2 Research aims and questions

Against this backdrop, the aim of this research is to examine how the expansion and consolidation of digital platforms are reshaping governance and power relations in English secondary schools, and how teachers, as reflexive agents, interpret, negotiate and at times resist these developments. The study is concerned both with the organisational consequences of platform-based management and with the situated responses of teachers working within these conditions. It does not treat platformisation as a uniform process or assume that digital technologies produce identical effects wherever they are introduced. Instead, it asks how the governing effects of platforms are mediated by organisational context, leadership arrangements and school culture.

² SIMS is a long-established school MIS used to manage pupil records, attendance and assessment data, typically forming the administrative backbone of school information systems.

³ Go4Schools is a cloud-based platform initially used alongside existing MIS for tracking assessment, behaviour and attendance, now evolving into a full MIS through phased or complete replacement.

⁴ Google Classroom is a cloud-based learning platform used to distribute materials, set assignments and facilitate communication between teachers and students, widely adopted during the pandemic.

⁵ Microsoft Teams is a communication and collaboration platform integrating video, messaging and file sharing, used in schools to support remote and hybrid teaching.

⁶ Satchel One is a cloud-based platform offering tools for homework, behaviour management and communication, positioned as a modular system that can integrate with or extend existing MIS.

⁷ Arbor is a cloud-based MIS designed to replace legacy systems, integrating administrative, pastoral and performance data within a single platform, typically adopted through staged migration.

To investigate these issues, the study adopts a comparative explanatory approach informed by critical realism. The research questions are intended to move beyond description alone. They begin with the observable reorganisation of teachers' work and managerial oversight, before turning to the underlying mechanisms and conditions that help explain variation across settings, and then to the ways teachers interpret and respond to these developments. The contrast between MAT and LA governance provides the empirical basis for this comparison, though the analysis does not treat governance model as a single determining variable; rather, it examines how governance arrangements interact with leadership practice, normative configurations and spatio-material conditions to produce different trajectories of platform adoption and oversight. The thesis is therefore guided by three interrelated research questions:

1. How do digital platforms restructure managerial oversight and teacher autonomy within English state-maintained secondary schools?
2. What underlying mechanisms and organisational conditions help to explain variation in platform governance and staff experience across different school governance contexts (Multi-Academy Trust and Local Authority)?
3. In what ways do teachers interpret, negotiate and resist platform-based control, and how do these practices shape the conduct and governance of school life?

Considered together, these questions approach platform power from different but connected positions. The first addresses the reorganisation of everyday relations between managers and teachers. The second seeks to explain why platform governance takes different forms across school settings, attending to the structural and cultural conditions within which those differences emerge. The third brings teacher agency into focus by examining the practices through which digital control is accommodated, mediated or challenged in everyday school life.

1.3 Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in a critical realist theoretical framework, which provides the ontological and explanatory basis for examining platform governance and teacher agency in English secondary schools. Critical realism proposes that social reality is stratified. Beneath observable events lie deeper structures and causal mechanisms that shape what occurs, while people encounter these processes through their lived experience. This perspective is particularly suited to this study because it directs attention beyond visible practices, such as teachers entering data into digital systems, towards the organisational and political conditions that generate those practices. By distinguishing between surface appearance and underlying causal powers, critical realism allows the thesis to examine how digital platforms exert influence within school organisations. Their effects arise not simply from the technology itself but from the way they reshape the conditions under which professional conduct becomes visible and subject to evaluation. Platform governance

is therefore approached not as a neutral technical development but as a contingent configuration of power embedded within specific organisational settings.

To develop this critical realist orientation in analytical terms, the thesis takes Bhaskar's metaphor of a stratified ontology, Archer's morphogenetic approach and Elder-Vass's concept of norm circles as its core theoretical framework. Bhaskar's stratified ontology supports movement from empirical observation towards the identification of generative mechanisms. Archer's morphogenetic approach then provides a temporal framework for examining how structure, culture and agency interact over time. Her distinction between structural and cultural conditioning at Time 1 (T_1), social interaction during Time 2–3 (T_2 – T_3), and emergent outcomes at Time 4 (T_4) makes it possible to analyse how existing governance arrangements and teacher–manager expectations shape the introduction and use of digital platforms, and how subsequent interaction may reproduce or modify those conditions.⁸

Building on this morphogenetic account of structural and cultural conditioning, the thesis takes Dave Elder-Vass's concept of norm circles to specify the meso-level processes through which expectations are sustained within schools. While Archer's framework clarifies how structural and cultural conditions shape interaction over time, norm circles make it possible to examine how shared understandings of appropriate teacher conduct are reproduced through endorsement and sanction among groups of actors. In the context of this research, they provide a way of analysing how expectations surrounding data use and compliance with platform routines become normalised among staff or alternatively contested. When situated within Archer's morphogenetic framework, norm circles illuminate how cultural emergent properties interact with organisational conditions to shape teachers' courses of action. This is central to the thesis's explanation of platform governance as a form of normative power.

Alongside these core critical realist resources, the thesis also incorporates a limited use of Foucauldian governmentality as a supplementary interpretive lens. Governmentality is not treated as an alternative ontological foundation but as a conceptual resource that helps clarify how governance is enacted in everyday organisational practice. In this study, the Foucauldian layer is deliberately restricted to a small number of concepts that illuminate how digital platforms organise calculative practices, extend visibility and encourage forms of self-monitoring among teachers. These ideas help interpret dimensions of power that Archer's framework does not fully elaborate: specifically, how disciplinary techniques organise visibility and comparative judgment, how calculative practices translate professional conduct into measurable outputs, and how subjectivation operates as teachers come to regulate their own behaviour in anticipation of evaluative scrutiny (Foucault, 1977; 1991; Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991). Each of these

⁸ In line with Archer's morphogenetic approach (1995), these temporal phases are referred to throughout the thesis as T_1 (structural and cultural context), T_2 – T_3 (social interaction and events) and T_4 (outcomes, whether reproduction or transformation).

concepts is applied selectively in Chapter 9, where they clarify how platform-mediated governance is enacted in everyday practice rather than simply imposed through structural conditions.

Considered together, this framework allows the thesis to treat platform governance as more than the adoption of educational technology. The project began with an interest in EdTech and the rapid digital changes associated with the pandemic. As the analysis developed, however, the central issue became organisational: how digital platforms reorganise authority, oversight and professional expectations within schools. Critical realism provides the depth ontology required to identify underlying mechanisms. Archer supplies the temporal framework through which structural conditioning, interaction and outcomes can be analysed. Elder-Vass clarifies how endorsement and sanction operate through norm circles, while selected Foucauldian concepts help illuminate how governance is enacted. The use of these complementary resources reflects a limited form of theoretical pluralism rather than a shift in ontological position, an approach consistent with earlier discussions of methodological pluralism in organisational research (Bell and Newby, 1977) and with attempts to work across paradigmatic boundaries in organisation theory (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Together these resources provide the conceptual foundation for analysing platform governance as a contingent and organisationally mediated form of power.

1.4 Research design and methodology

To address the research questions, the study adopts a qualitative comparative case-study design. It investigates two secondary schools in England selected for their contrasting governance arrangements. One, referred to as Matson Academy, is part of a large Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) characterised by a highly centralised governance structure. The other, Larwood School, is a Local Authority (LA) maintained school operating within a more decentralised and traditional governance model. This contrast provides an opportunity to examine how different institutional contexts shape the implementation and everyday use of digital platforms. By examining a MAT academy and an LA school side by side, the research examines how organisational conditions mediate the governing effects of digital systems.

The two-case design supports theoretically informed comparison. Digital platforms are present in both settings, yet the organisational environments in which they operate differ markedly. Decision-making hierarchies, accountability cultures and policy expectations vary across the two schools, shaping how platforms are mobilised and how their use is experienced by staff. The comparison therefore allows the analysis to examine variation in platform governance, including the ways platforms become implicated in monitoring practices and the organisation of daily routines, whilst also exploring how teachers interpret and respond to those arrangements. Differences between the cases can therefore be examined in relation not simply to the technology itself but to the

organisational conditions within which it becomes embedded. The comparative design also helps distinguish developments that appear broadly structural from those that remain context-specific.

Data collection within each case study was extensive and multi-modal. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of participants, including classroom teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders. These interviews explored participants' experiences of working with digital systems and their perceptions of changes to oversight and autonomy. Thirty interviews were completed across the two schools, providing coverage across subject areas, experience levels and institutional roles.

Interviews were complemented by observations of everyday school activities. Staff meetings, training sessions focused on digital platforms, informal staffroom conversations and classroom lessons were observed in order to understand how platforms featured in routine practice and how they were discussed amongst staff. Documentary and artefactual material was also collected, including school policies relating to data and IT use, internal training materials, organisational charts and examples of platform interfaces such as dashboard layouts and automated notifications. These sources provided insight into the technical infrastructure and organisational arrangements through which platform governance operated.

As the research took place during the post-pandemic period, when digital platforms were already embedded within everyday routines, it was possible to observe a relatively stable phase of platform use rather than an early stage of experimentation. Fieldwork was conducted primarily during 2024–2025, after schools had returned to normal face-to-face teaching while the digital infrastructures accelerated during COVID-19 remained firmly in place.

A further component of the methodology involved the integration of reflexive autoethnography alongside the comparative case study. I have a professional background as a secondary school teacher and had previously taught at Matson Academy. This insider positioning created the possibility of drawing on personal experience as a source of data in a critically reflexive manner. Throughout the study I maintained a reflexive journal and produced narrative accounts of significant moments from my professional experience, including the abrupt transition to online teaching during the 2020 lockdown, the introduction of new learning platforms at Matson Academy and organisational changes such as the removal of a central staffroom.

These autoethnographic reflections help situate the research within lived experience of platformisation in secondary schools. They provide insight into aspects of platform governance that are often difficult to capture through interviews alone, including the affective dimensions of organisational change and the informal practices through which teachers adapt to new systems. Prior professional experience also sharpened the focus of the fieldwork by highlighting issues that might otherwise remain less visible during observation.

At the same time, occupying an insider position at Matson Academy and an outsider position at Larwood School required sustained methodological reflexivity. Familiarity and existing relationships in Matson Academy facilitated access and often encouraged openness in interviews, which sometimes took on the tone of candid discussions between colleagues. In Larwood School, where I had no prior connections, additional time was devoted to building rapport and explaining the aims of the research. This helped establish trust and reduce the potential influence of outsider status. The combination of insider and outsider perspectives ultimately strengthened the analysis by providing contrasting vantage points from which to interpret similar organisational phenomena.

Data analysis followed a strategy informed by critical realism. Interviews were transcribed and, together with fieldnotes and documentary material, imported into qualitative analysis software. Initial coding within each case proceeded inductively in order to identify recurring themes relating to surveillance, collegial relations, data practices and organisational narratives surrounding digital systems. From this stage, detailed case narratives and thematic summaries were developed for each school.

A cross-case comparison was then undertaken to examine patterns of similarity and difference between the two settings. This analysis was structured partly through Archer's morphogenetic sequence. Structural and cultural conditions present at Time 1 (T_1), including governance arrangements and professional cultures, were examined alongside the interactions that unfolded during Time 2–3 (T_2 – T_3) as teachers and managers engaged with platform systems. Attention then turned to the outcomes that emerged at Time 4 (T_4), allowing the study to analyse how platform-related practices developed over time within each institutional context. Using this temporal framework supported analysis of how different governance arrangements shaped the development of platform oversight across the two schools.

A central analytical step involved retroduction: moving from observed patterns towards theorising the mechanisms capable of producing them. Rather than treating staff groups as homogeneous, the analysis examined how different norm circles operated within each school and how endorsement and sanction shaped patterns of compliance, negotiation and selective engagement with platform routines. The analysis therefore moved iteratively between data and theory, refining proposed explanations as evidence accumulated across the two cases.

Ethical considerations and research quality were addressed throughout the study. Ethical approval was secured prior to fieldwork, and participation was based on informed consent. Pseudonyms are used throughout the thesis to protect anonymity, with additional care taken in the storage and presentation of sensitive material. The credibility of the findings was strengthened through triangulation across data sources, supported by selective forms of participant checking and the maintenance of a detailed audit trail. Consistent with a critical realist orientation, evaluation

focused on explanatory coherence rather than descriptive completeness. The intention was to develop theoretically grounded accounts capable of illuminating the causal processes shaping organisational practice.

1.5 Researcher positionality and reflexivity

This study was shaped in part by my prior experience as a secondary school teacher. Before beginning the PhD, I spent nearly two decades working in English secondary schools, including a sustained period at Matson Academy, the MAT examined in this research. Direct experience of policy reform and the expansion of digital data systems, together with organisational changes associated with the pandemic, informed the development of the research questions and the decision to examine platform governance as an organisational process.

This background positioned me simultaneously as an insider to the profession and as a researcher analysing it. Familiarity with school routines and accountability practices supported access to participants and informed the comparative design of the study across two contrasting governance settings. At the same time, the research was conducted with explicit attention to methodological reflexivity in managing the relationship between prior experience and analytic interpretation.

The practical strategies through which positionality was addressed during fieldwork and analysis are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

1.6 Thesis structure

This thesis is organised into ten chapters.

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 establishes the policy and organisational context from which platform governance emerges. It traces the neoliberal restructuring of English secondary schooling through successive waves of market-oriented reform, the growing prominence of performance measurement and inspection regimes, and the institutional reorganisation associated with academisation. Together, these developments consolidated managerial and data-oriented approaches to school governance, creating the conditions in which digital oversight could emerge and become embedded. Drawing on the labour process tradition, the chapter situates these developments within longer-standing debates on technology, control and deskilling, as well as the surveillance and spatial reorganisation of professional work, establishing the conceptual vocabulary through which the empirical analysis interprets platform-mediated oversight. It then examines shifting regimes of teacher autonomy, from relative to controlled and productive forms, situating the professional context in which platform-based management operates.

Chapter 3 turns to platform power, digital governance and the expansion of data-driven schooling within the policy and organisational environment established in Chapter 2. It examines the growing integration of digital infrastructures into the routine administration of education and the ways in which data-oriented management practices increasingly shape the interpretation of teachers' work. The chapter traces the commercial and political conditions underpinning the platformisation of education, explores how surveillance capitalism and datafication have reconfigured teacher–manager relations, and considers how a small number of dominant providers have consolidated their position across the school sector. It concludes by introducing governmentality as an interpretive lens for understanding how governance is enacted through everyday practices of visibility and calculative comparison in digitally mediated school environments.

Chapter 4 develops the theoretical framework underpinning the study. It sets out the critical realist foundations of the thesis, explaining how Bhaskar's stratified ontology supports mechanism-based explanation. It situates Archer's morphogenetic approach within the wider structure–agency debate, contrasting it with Giddens' structuration theory and Bourdieu's practice theory, and demonstrates how her analytical dualism provides a temporal framework for analysing the interaction of structure, culture and agency. The chapter then introduces Elder-Vass's concept of norm circles as a means of explaining how expectations surrounding platform use become collectively sustained through processes of endorsement and sanction at the meso level. Finally, it incorporates selected concepts from Foucauldian governmentality as a complementary interpretive lens to illuminate the calculative and self-monitoring dimensions of platform governance that are not fully developed within Archer's framework.

Chapter 5 sets out the methodological approach. It justifies the comparative case-study design and explains the selection of two contrasting schools as the basis for explanatory comparison. The chapter describes the data collection methods used across each site, addresses the integration of reflexive autoethnography alongside the case study work, and examines ethical considerations and issues of researcher positionality. It also details the five-stage analytical process through which empirical material is developed into stratified, retroductive and morphogenetic explanatory accounts.

Chapters 6 and 7 present the empirical findings from the two case-study schools. Chapter 6 examines Matson Academy, the MAT school, focusing on the loss of communal space and the fragmentation of collegiality, managerial centralisation, the role of efficiency discourses in platform adoption, and the intensification of surveillance and datafication as mechanisms of staff control. Chapter 7 analyses Larwood School, the Local Authority school, where leadership instability, weaker normative alignment and retained communal spaces produced a more contested and uneven pattern of platform governance. Read together, the two chapters demonstrate how

comparable digital systems can generate substantially different organisational experiences when embedded within contrasting institutional environments.

Chapter 8 brings the two cases into direct comparison through a cross-case retroductive and morphogenetic synthesis. It identifies the structural conditions, cultural configurations and normative arrangements that account for divergence in platform governance across the two schools, and examines how these conditions shaped the trajectory of digital oversight and the forms of teacher agency that emerged within each setting.

Chapter 9 develops the broader conceptual implications of the findings and sets out the thesis's original contributions. Revisiting the theoretical framework in light of the empirical analysis, it argues that platform governance operates as a contingent form of normative power rather than as a technically determined or purely surveillance-driven phenomenon. Drawing on Archer's morphogenetic approach and Elder-Vass's theory of norm circles, the chapter explains how expectations surrounding platform use become stabilised or contested within specific organisational contexts. It also considers the spatial and material dimensions of platform governance and reflects on the implications for understanding schools as digital organisations and teachers as reflexive agents.

Chapter 10 concludes the thesis. It revisits the research questions and synthesises the principal findings before considering their implications for research, policy and professional practice. The chapter also addresses the limitations of the study and identifies directions for future research.

2 The neoliberal restructuring of English schooling and the conditions of platform governance

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the policy and institutional developments that have shaped the contemporary governance of English secondary schools. It focuses on the rise of neoliberal reform and the ways in which its assumptions have become embedded in educational policy and organisation. The discussion situates the thesis within wider debates about the changing relationship between teacher autonomy and managerial oversight, tracing the restructuring of the system that created the conditions in which digital platforms could later become integrated into the routines of teachers' work.

The chapter begins with the emergence of neoliberal thinking in education policy and the rise of New Public Management (NPM) as a key mechanism through which market-oriented reform was implemented. The introduction of performance indicators and league tables reshaped how schools became visible to policymakers and, therefore, open to comparison. Particular attention is then given to the academisation agenda, which shifted authority away from local authorities towards Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), altering the organisational framework through which schools are governed, intensifying the forms of oversight.

The chapter then considers how these reforms reshaped teachers' work, through the growing influence of performativity and managerialism. Drawing on labour process literature, it examines how technology became increasingly connected to managerial control, alongside the spatial arrangements of schools. These developments are situated within the long-standing debates about the organisation and control of work before the discussion traces how autonomy has shifted across three broad phases, from relative to controlled and ultimately productive forms, each reflecting the changing patterns of teacher accountability.

Although much of the scholarship on neoliberalism and NPM focuses on macro-level policy trajectories or higher education, less attention has been paid to how these ideological frameworks shape the internal dynamics of schools. This chapter establishes the institutional background for the analysis that follows, outlining the governance environment within which digital oversight could subsequently develop. Chapter 3 then turns to the commercial and political conditions through which platform governance has emerged as a distinctive feature of that environment.

2.2 Neoliberalism and New Public Management: a restructuring of state education

‘Neoliberalism is, in the first instance, a theory of political economic practices that proposes human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade...If markets do not exist (in areas such as...education...), then they must be created, by state action if necessary’ (Harvey, 2005:2).

Neoliberalism refers to a set of economic and political ideas that place market mechanisms at the centre of social organisation (Gerstle, 2022). It promotes competition, individual responsibility and the extension of market logics into domains previously organised as public services. Core elements include privatisation, deregulation and the commodification of public provision. Through these processes, activities once overseen by the state are reorganised according to commercial principles. As Tabb (2002:29) explains, this involves ‘moving their provision from the public sector to the private – along with deregulating how private producers can behave.’ The wider effect is a gradual reorientation of public institutions towards market priorities, turning areas of social life into potential sites of profit-making activity (Harvey, 2005:16).

A number of scholars have emphasised the ideological strength of neoliberalism. Bourdieu (1998:29), for instance, describes it as a doctrine presented as natural and unavoidable: ‘Everywhere we hear it said, all day long – and this is what gives the dominant discourse its strength – that there is nothing to put forward in opposition to the neoliberal view.’ Hursh (2007:498) similarly observes that neoliberal education reforms are often framed as ‘necessary, inevitable and unquestionable.’ Bauman (1999:28) makes a related point, arguing that collective political debate is increasingly displaced by ‘the neo-liberal chorus singing the praise of unbound ‘market forces’ and free trade.’ At the level of the individual, neoliberalism also reshapes subjectivity. Foucault (2008:226) argues that neoliberalism transforms the individual from a participant in market exchange into ‘an entrepreneur of himself’, recasting people as self-managing economic actors. Margaret Thatcher’s infamous view that ‘economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul’ (1981) reflects this broader project. As Lemke (2002:59) notes, neoliberal governance encourages individuals to evaluate decisions through cost–benefit reasoning, linking moral responsibility with economic calculation.

From this ideological context emerged New Public Management (NPM), which gained influence from the late 1970s onwards as a programme for reorganising public services. NPM refers to the

introduction of business-oriented methods into the public sector, particularly those concerned with efficiency, accountability and performance measurement (Hood, 1991). Denhardt and Denhardt (2000:549) describe it as ‘a cluster of ideas and practices (including reinvention and neomanagerialism) that seek, at their core, to use private-sector and business approaches in the public sector.’ NPM operates both as an extension of neoliberal thinking and as a mechanism through which it is enacted in public institutions. The role of the state is gradually recast from direct provider to regulator and contract manager. Administrative practices increasingly prioritise measurable outputs, performance indicators and managerial oversight, displacing earlier traditions of professional discretion and public service ethos (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992).

Supporters of NPM have often argued that such reforms improve responsiveness and efficiency within public services (Lane, 2002). Critics, however, suggest that the approach simplifies complex social institutions by imposing narrow calculative frameworks. Public organisations are encouraged to emulate market competition, introducing performance targets and incentive structures that mirror commercial environments. Christopher Hood (1991; 1995) identifies several principles associated with NPM, including the decentralisation of management authority, the use of output controls and the promotion of entrepreneurial leadership. These ideas were intended to replace bureaucratic routines with a stronger emphasis on measurable performance, though the extent to which public-sector management was actually transformed along private-sector lines remains contested (Boyne, 2002).

Osborne (2006:379) identifies six key features of NPM that help explain its influence in education. Applied to schools, these reforms include the introduction of managerial performance metrics, the expansion of executive-style leadership roles and the introduction of forms of governance oriented towards measurable outcomes. Figure 2.1 summarises these components and their relevance to this study (adapted from Osborne, 2006).

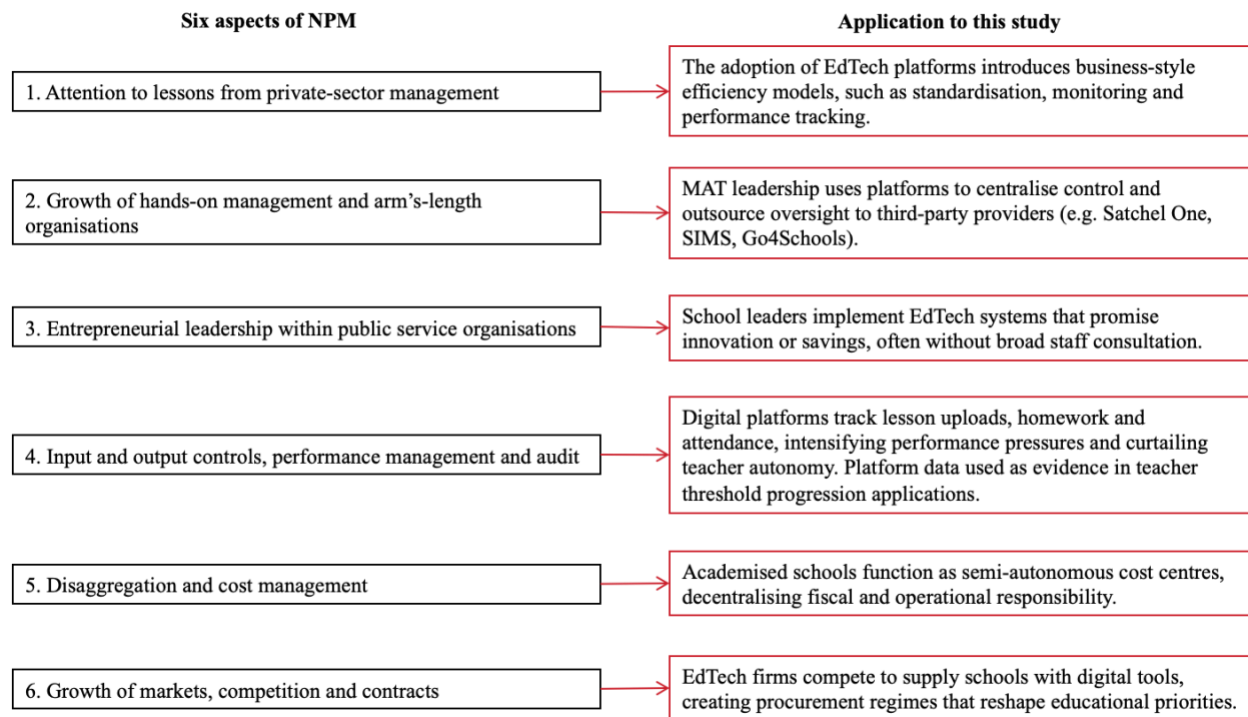


Figure 2.1: Components of NPM (Adapted from Osborne, 2006).

At its core, NPM promotes the disaggregation of public services, the outsourcing of provision and the introduction of competitive pressures. In education this logic is reflected in performance benchmarking linked to league tables and the expansion of external inspection regimes. Such developments have contributed to what has been described as micro-accountability, where teaching practice becomes increasingly framed through measurable outputs. England has been widely identified as a leading site of these reforms. Wilkins, Gobby and Keddie (2021:28), for example, describe England as a ‘vanguard’ of market-oriented educational change. Lingard and Rawolle (2011) similarly argue that the expansion of NPM reflects the emergence of a ‘global education policy field’ structured around benchmarking and performance comparison.

These reforms have had significant implications for teachers’ work. A substantial body of research has associated neoliberal policy frameworks with tighter monitoring and reduced professional autonomy, raising questions about how such developments are mediated through digital platform infrastructures in today’s schools. Apple (2005:13) argues that democratic values associated with trust and collective deliberation have increasingly been displaced by economic calculation and managerial oversight. Importantly, neoliberalism does not imply the withdrawal of the state. Neoliberal reforms did not involve a simple retreat of the state but a reconfiguration of its role in organising markets and governing institutions (Gane, 2012). Rather, they involved the active reshaping of educational institutions in ways that promoted market-oriented forms of

accountability and evaluation. Lupton (2011) demonstrates how this reconfiguration becomes visible in everyday school practices, including inspection procedures, funding arrangements and procurement systems.

Although the literature on neoliberalism and NPM in education is extensive (e.g. Ball, 2003; Apple, 2009; Gewirtz et al., 2009), much of it focuses on macro-level policy developments or on higher education. Less attention has been paid to how these ideological frameworks shape the internal dynamics of schools themselves. This study therefore examines how neoliberal and managerial reforms are translated into everyday practice. Building on Apple's (2009) analysis of deskilling, reskilling and intensification within the contemporary digital school environment.

The next section turns to academisation as a key structural mechanism through which these neoliberal and managerial reforms have been institutionalised in English schooling. It considers how academy structures reshape governance arrangements and accountability frameworks, providing an important backdrop for understanding the relationship between platformisation and teacher–manager power relations.

2.3 Platform governance, school autonomy and the academised state

2.3.1 The ideological antecedents of academisation

'Those who preach...that excellent education will be achieved by giving state secondary schools a quasi-independence...are usually people who do not use state schools or work in them. Their motives are more often drawn from political or professional ambition...The matter is still one of faith rather than of evidence' (Green, 2005:4).

Although academisation is often associated with the academy reforms introduced under New Labour, its ideological roots lie in earlier attempts to reorganise public services around market principles. During the 1980s the Thatcher government pursued policies designed to reduce the coordinating role of the state and to increase institutional autonomy within the public sector. These developments reflected a broader transition away from the post-war welfare settlement towards what Tomlinson (2001) describes as a 'post-welfare' education system (Lawrence, 1992).

Two pieces of legislation are significant. The Education (No. 2) Act 1986 expanded the role of school governing bodies and weakened the intermediary position of local authorities. Members of the Prime Minister's policy unit, including Oliver Letwin, argued that schools should operate as autonomous professional institutions rather than as components of what they characterised as a

bureaucratic ‘nationalised industry’ of education (Simon, 1991). This rhetoric framed decentralisation as both necessary and desirable, presenting local authorities as obstacles to innovation. Clarke and Newman (1997:46) describe this reform discourse as a ‘defensive discourse of turbulence and uncertainty’, which justified structural change by emphasising institutional failure.

The 1987 Conservative manifesto extended this argument by proposing that schools should be able to opt out of local authority control and receive funding directly from central government. This proposal marked a significant ideological shift. Competition and institutional independence were presented as mechanisms for improving standards, while critics warned that the reforms risked weakening established structures of professional collaboration and democratic accountability (Simon, 1991).

The Education Reform Act 1988 consolidated these developments. It introduced Local Management of Schools (LMS), which transferred significant financial and administrative responsibilities to school governing bodies. Under Section 36(2), LEAs were required to allocate each school’s budget share directly to its governing body. These reforms formed part of a broader neoliberal project to disaggregate local authority coordination and reconstitute schools as quasi-autonomous units operating within a competitive marketplace. Grant-maintained schools, national curriculum reforms and new performance measurement frameworks were all introduced during this period, reinforcing the emerging influence of NPM.

Commentators such as Chitty (1989), Ball (2018) and Jones (2003) have argued that the 1988 reforms marked a decisive reorientation of English education. The system moved away from the post-war model of locally coordinated provision and towards a regime organised around central oversight. The roles of headteachers and governors also shifted. Educational leadership increasingly involved responsibilities associated with organisational management of financial oversight and regulatory compliance (Gunter and McGinity, 2014). These developments laid the groundwork for later forms of corporate-style governance, including academy chains and MATs. They also established the institutional and ideological conditions within which later academy reforms expanded market-oriented governance across the school system.

2.3.2 The expansion of market autonomy

The academisation programme represents a major institutional expression of neoliberal reform in English education. Over the past two decades it has reshaped the governance of state schools, reducing the coordinating role of local authorities and replacing it with new organisational structures centred on Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). These changes are closely aligned with the principles of New Public Management (NPM), which promote managerial oversight, performance monitoring and competition between institutions (Hood, 1991; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). They

also reflect the development of quasi-market reforms associated with Le Grand, in which parental choice and institutional competition were expected to improve school performance through the capacity of parents to choose between schools and act on comparative performance information (Le Grand, 1991). Within education, these mechanisms depended on the expansion of league tables and performance indicators, embedding comparison more firmly in the governance of schools. Academisation has therefore not simply altered administrative arrangements; it has reorganised the framework through which schools are governed.

West and Bailey (2013:138) describe this development as a transformation of the English secondary education landscape, characterised by the ‘rapid expansion of independent academies, run by private companies with charitable status, and funded directly by central government.’ The diminishing role of local authorities, therefore, marks a significant departure from the governance model established under the 1944 Education Act, in which Local Education Authorities (LEAs) acted as key coordinators of school provision. Academies now operate through contractual agreements with the Secretary of State for Education and typically exercise greater discretion over staffing, pay structures, procurement and aspects of admissions policy. By January 2024, 81.9 per cent of secondary schools in England were academies or free schools, educating 81.7 per cent of pupils (DfE, 2024), a marked increase from 64.3 per cent in 2015/16 (see Figures 2.2 and 2.3).⁹

⁹ Free schools are state-funded schools in England, established under the Academies Act 2010, that operate outside local authority control. They may be set up by a range of groups, including charities, trusts and parent groups, and are accountable directly to the Secretary of State for Education.

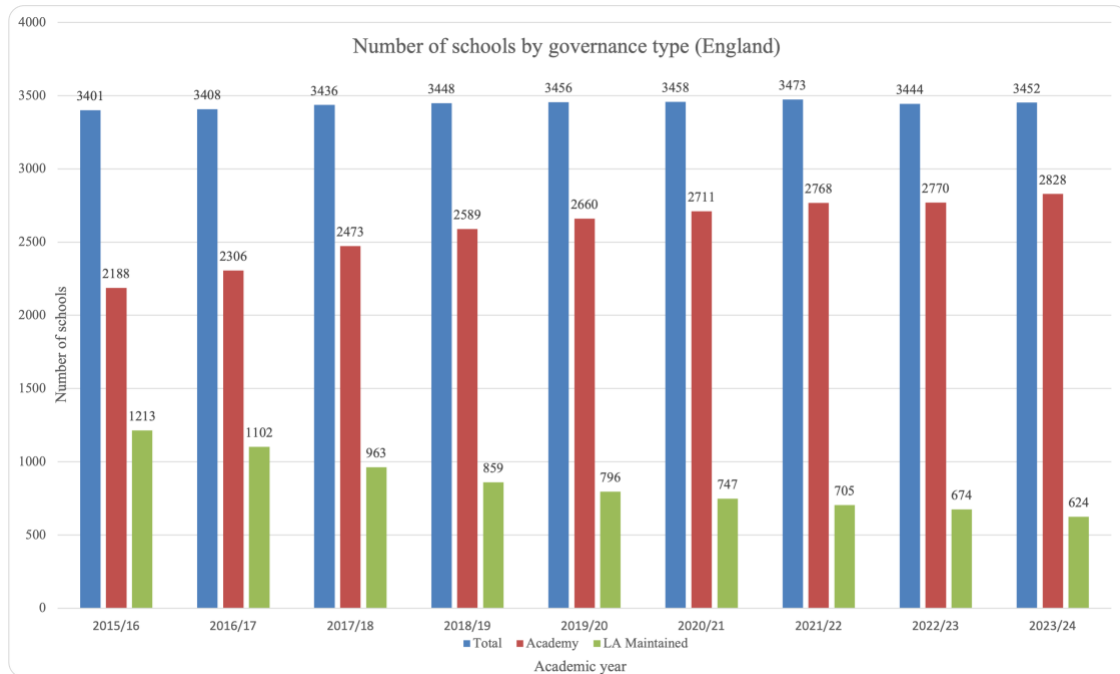


Figure 2.2: Breakdown of state-funded English secondary schools by the number of schools (data taken from DfE, 2024).

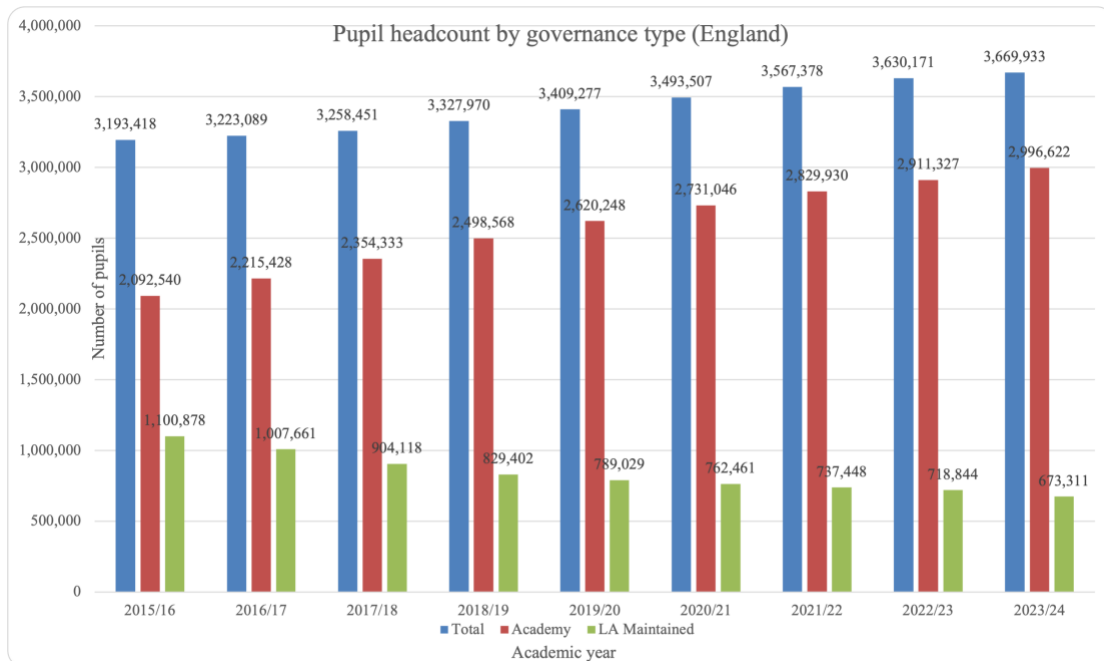


Figure 2.3: Breakdown of state-funded English secondary schools by student headcount (data taken from DfE, 2024).

Many of the institutional foundations for these reforms had already been laid under New Labour. Through its support for public–private partnerships, business sponsorship and investment in information technology, the government promoted a vision of education closely linked to the emerging knowledge economy. Hatcher (2001) and Wintour (2005) identify a dual objective within this agenda: modernising the sector through private-sector techniques while positioning education as a globally competitive industry. Rather than retreating, the state assumed a different role within this arrangement. As Osborne (1993) famously argued, the aim was to ‘steer rather than row’.

The Academies Act 2010 accelerated this process by allowing all schools, rather than only those judged to be failing, to convert to academy status. The policy was presented by the Conservative-led coalition government as a means of freeing schools from local authority ‘bureaucracy’ while raising standards through greater institutional autonomy. At the same time, however, the reforms strengthened central oversight through funding arrangements and accountability frameworks. Gove’s (2010) rhetoric emphasised teacher professionalism, yet the policy architecture aligned closely with NPM principles of managerial devolution combined with performance monitoring.

Within this policy environment, schools increasingly came to be understood as service providers operating within a competitive system. Parents were recast as consumers, with league tables and inspection reports providing information through which school performance could be compared. In this context, procurement of digital technologies became an important mechanism through which schools could demonstrate their effectiveness. Platforms for data management and monitoring therefore began to assume a central place within the governance of academised education.

2.3.3 Managerial overload and the erosion of democratic governance

Although academy status was frequently justified in terms of autonomy, it often generated new administrative pressures. Local Management of Schools and the expansion of school-level responsibilities introduced complex financial, legal and human-resource obligations that governing bodies were not always equipped to manage effectively (Balarin et al., 2008). As schools assumed responsibility for procurement and contractual arrangements, commercial considerations increasingly entered routine decision-making. These demands frequently diverted attention away from educational priorities.

Governance overload, difficulties recruiting governors and high turnover within governing bodies further weakened local accountability (James et al., 2011). At the same time, critics such as Green (2005) and Gillard (2018) argue that central government was able to shift responsibility for funding pressures and operational difficulties onto individual schools. The language of autonomy therefore

often masked a simultaneous centralisation of authority. During this period the labour process of teachers was also changing, even as the governance structures responsible for oversight struggled to adapt to their expanded responsibilities.

2.3.4 Conclusion: the state as market-maker

Contrary to claims that neoliberal reform withdraws the state from public provision, the English education system illustrates a different pattern. Rather than retreating, the state remains deeply involved, although its role has shifted towards constructing and regulating markets.

In education this has meant embedding competition and data monitoring into the everyday organisation of schools. The academisation programme should therefore be understood not simply as a policy reform but as a structural mechanism through which neoliberal rationalities and New Public Management logics are institutionalised. As Chapter 3 will demonstrate, these conditions also facilitated the expansion of educational technology providers and the development of digital infrastructures that now increasingly mediate school governance. Private companies entered the emerging EdTech market, supplying the digital systems on which school governance has now become increasingly dependent.

The following section turns to the role of digital platforms within this restructured system, examining how they extend managerial oversight and reshape teacher–manager power relations.

2.4 Managerialism, performativity and the rise of EdTech

‘There should be, with respect to education, a vigilant eye everywhere, and many schools have, for want of that, sunk very materially indeed’ (Lloyd, W.F., 1834; cited in MacChure, 1979:33).

The period following the COVID-19 pandemic has seen a rapid expansion of digital technologies across state-maintained education in England. Under the combined pressures of pandemic disruption and the governance arrangements associated with academisation, schools adopted digital platforms at an unprecedented pace. These technologies reorganised everyday working practices while also altering how oversight and accountability were exercised. In many cases, they reinforced the existing managerial framework associated with New Public Management (NPM), embedding performance monitoring and data reporting more deeply into routine school activity. As Evans (2008:21) observes, professional autonomy has increasingly ‘given way to accountability’ and to ‘new professionalisms’ that redefine how teachers’ work is organised and

evaluated. Within the expanding EdTech sector, however, teachers are often positioned primarily as users of pre-designed systems rather than as participants in shaping them. Hughes (2019:65) argues that educators frequently ‘lack participatory roles and responsibilities... and assume consumptive roles with little agency.’

The decentralised governance associated with academisation is often presented as encouraging innovation and institutional independence (Ball, 2009). These reforms frequently operate alongside intensified standardisation and high-stakes accountability. As Ball (1994, cited in Anderson, 2001:203, *italics added*) notes, ‘evaluation and accountability in the context of school autonomy become the *technologies of control that allow the neo-liberal state to steer the system from a distance*.’ Even before the pandemic, teacher professionalism in England had become increasingly contested. Helsby (1999:93) observes that ‘there [was] nothing simple or static about the concept of teacher professionalism in England: it [was] constantly changing and constantly being redefined in different ways and at different times to serve different interests.’ The rapid expansion of digital infrastructures during the pandemic intensified these ongoing transformations.

2.4.1 Marketisation and digital competition

Market-oriented reforms have increasingly positioned schools as competitors within quasi-markets for pupils, funding and reputation (Gewirtz, 2010). It is, within this context, useful to distinguish between marketisation and managerialism. Both are linked to NPM, but they operate in different ways. Marketisation encourages competition and consumer choice, while managerialism focuses on monitoring and standardisation within organisations (Collyer, 2015:328). EdTech firms frequently present their products as tools for innovation and improvement, promising greater efficiency and enhanced organisational performance. Schools, operating within competitive policy environments, are therefore encouraged to adopt new technologies as signals of modernisation.

The effects of this dynamic are uneven. Lubienski (2001; 2009) argues that market mechanisms that claim to stimulate innovation can restrict it, particularly in schools with fewer resources to invest in new technologies. Cultural narratives surrounding innovation also shape how these technologies are interpreted and adopted (Hughes, 2019). Although market discourse often emphasises efficiency, the outcomes may reinforce existing inequalities between schools (Collyer, 2015; Jones, 2015). In such circumstances, technological adoption becomes closely linked to institutional survival. Marketing strategies and competitive pressures encourage schools to continually update digital systems (Bose, 2023; Santoki et al., 2024). Williamson (2022:160) notes that the expansion strategies of major technology firms increasingly resemble attempts to consolidate market dominance. This concentration risks deepening disparities, particularly where disadvantaged schools struggle to compete for resources (Jones, 2015:28).

2.4.2 Autonomy and performance management

The promise of school autonomy within NPM frameworks is closely tied to systems of performance monitoring. Academies are granted greater operational flexibility, yet this is accompanied by intensified expectations surrounding data production and measurable outcomes. As Denhardt and Denhardt (2007:705) observe, reforms informed by NPM frequently rely on performance measurement systems through which ‘data can be used to identify areas for improvement and to hold agencies accountable for their results.’ Digital platforms now generate large quantities of information about classroom practice and student progress, making it possible to monitor institutional performance in increasingly detailed ways.

Although these tools are often presented as improving transparency, they also extend managerial oversight. Concerns have been raised about algorithmic bias, limited transparency in decision-making and the erosion of teacher judgment (Hood and Lodge, 2004). Standardised indicators can come to define what counts as success, leaving less room for professional discretion. Teachers nevertheless retain some capacity to interpret and respond to these conditions. Helsby (1995:320) notes that if professionalism is socially constructed, teachers remain ‘key players in that construction’, capable of accepting or resisting forms of external control. Within academised systems, resistance may take subtle forms, including selective engagement with digital systems or strategic non-use where platform routines appear to prioritise compliance over educational value (Ferguson, 2012).

As Wilkins, Gobby and Keddie (2021:28) argue, the autonomy granted to schools is often conditional: ‘a highly contingent, regulated autonomy, liable to being withdrawn if performance targets are not met.’ Autonomy therefore functions as a disciplinary mechanism. Schools are decentralised organisationally while remaining tightly aligned with accountability frameworks that shape acceptable practice.

2.4.3 Structural tensions and stakeholder misalignment

The integration of EdTech within academised school systems also introduces organisational tensions. Mattsson and Andersson (2019:1108) highlight how public–private partnerships often produce mismatches between commercial priorities and the goals of public service providers. National policy objectives concerning equality and access may conflict with local financial constraints or pedagogical priorities. Within academy trusts, the shift of authority from local authorities to school leadership teams or trust executives has intensified these tensions. Leaders are expected to balance educational priorities with financial management and technological procurement.

McGrath and Åkerfeldt (2019:144) describe EdTech discourse as strongly optimistic, promising to modernise educational institutions. This promise is accompanied, however, by a managerial logic of quantification. Hood (1991:4) notes that NPM privileges ‘explicit standards and measures of performance’, a tendency that increasingly shapes how teaching is evaluated. Governance therefore operates less through direct command than through expectations embedded in policy frameworks and professional norms. As Gronn (2003:8) observes, ‘control of employees is achieved through a policy regime and a culture of performativity.’ Platforms contribute to materialising these expectations by translating institutional priorities into measurable organisational practices.

2.4.4 Technology, control and deskilling

The tensions between managerial authority and teacher discretion now mediated through digital platforms in English state schools are neither new nor unique to education. They form part of a much longer debate within labour process theory concerning how work is organised. Revisiting these debates provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how aspects of teachers’ work have become increasingly standardised and open to managerial oversight through digital systems.

The roots of this analysis can be traced to Marx’s argument in *Capital* that, under capitalism, machinery and organisational techniques function not only as instruments of production but also as means of controlling the labour process. Through these arrangements, knowledge and discretion can be transferred away from workers and absorbed into machines, managerial systems or organisational structures (Marx, 1976[1867]).

The control logic contained in primitive capitalism was extended with the development of modern management. F.W. Taylor’s theory of scientific management advocated the systematic study of work in order to divide tasks into discrete components, standardise their execution and separate the conception of work from its performance (Taylor, 1911). Taylorism was therefore not simply a method of improving efficiency; it was also a technology of control. By transforming workers’ knowledge into standardised procedures, it made labour more measurable and substitutable. The incorporation of planning and expertise into managerial systems established the framework through which later debates about deskilling would develop.

Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) re-examined the influence of Taylor’s managerial agenda into a broader theory of deskilling. He argued that twentieth-century management, drawing on Taylorist principles, progressively separated the conception of work from its execution across an expanding range of occupations, including administrative and technical roles. In doing so, skilled labour was reduced to sequences of routinised and closely supervised operations (Braverman, 1974). For Braverman, deskilling was not an accidental consequence of technological change but a recurring managerial strategy through which control

over the labour process was secured. His central argument, that technology is never a neutral instrument but a site of contestation over skill and authority, remains influential. It is particularly relevant to education, where professional discretion has historically been central to teachers' work but has increasingly been shaped by standardised systems of measurement and accountability.

Braverman's argument generated extensive debate, and the responses it provoked are as important for this study as the original thinking. Critics argued that he overstated the coherence of managerial strategy while underestimating worker agency, subjectivity and resistance. Friedman (1977), for example, distinguished between direct control, which seeks compliance through close supervision, and responsible autonomy, through which management secures commitment by encouraging workers to 'identify with the competitive aims of the enterprise' (Friedman, 1977:48). Although predominantly developed in relation to industrial workplaces, this distinction also captures a tension evident in schools, where managerial systems often seek both compliance with organisational expectations and the active commitment of teachers to shared professional goals. Edwards (1979) identifies three forms of control: simple, technical and bureaucratic. He argued that bureaucratic control, embedded within organisational rules, hierarchies and procedures, became the dominant means through which work was regulated. Burawoy (1979), however, shifted attention from coercion towards consent, by showing how workers' active participation in the labour process can itself become organised in ways that secure cooperation. Collectively, these accounts establish that workplace control is plural rather than monolithic. This creates the foundations for later analyses of normative control, which extend labour process theory beyond the material organisation of work to identity and subjectivity.

Burawoy's shift from coercion to consent reflected this wider change in the analysis of workplace control. From the 1980s onwards, through a focus on corporate culture and human resource management, control was increasingly analysed not only through the material organisation of work but also to the management of subjectivity. Willmott (1993:527) provides the clearest expression of this perspective, arguing that the strengthening of corporate culture compounds employees' loss of control over the means of production (Braverman, 1974; Edwards, 1979) with a further, systematised loss of autonomy over employees' values and identities; normative control thereby supplements, rather than replaces, the bureaucratic and technical forms identified earlier (Knights and Willmott, 1989). This turn is, however, contested. While Foucauldian analyses treat the management of culture as a new capacity to shape employees' identities, academics working within the materialist tradition argue that it more likely to secure instrumental compliance, rather than genuine internalisation (Thompson and McHugh, 1990). Revisiting this balance on the fiftieth anniversary of *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, Smith and Thompson (2024) argue that the engagement with culture and identity represented a post-structuralist departure from work and political economy. In doing so, reaffirming labour process as a materialist framework for analysing developments such as digital Taylorism and algorithmic management. This debate continues to

shape competing analyses of digital workplaces, with ongoing disagreements over the relative significance of material labour processes, culture, identity, and subject formation.

By the late twentieth century, attention had increasingly turned to the role of information and surveillance technologies in reshaping these forms of control. As Fordist production gave way to more flexible forms of work organisation that increasingly combined delegated responsibility with intensified systems of monitoring and measurement (Aglietta, 2000; Boyer, 1990). Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) argue that these arrangements combined vertical electronic surveillance with horizontal peer scrutiny, producing what they describe as an ‘Electronic Panopticon’. Drawing explicitly on Foucault’s (1977) analysis of the panopticon, they argue that digital technologies allow ‘a disembodied eye’ to overcome the constraints of architecture and space (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992:283). In their view, technologies associated with delegated responsibility simultaneously make work continuously visible. Control therefore operates not only through managerial observation but also through the scrutiny of colleagues. Sewell’s (1998:422) later work develops this argument, suggesting that vertical electronic monitoring ‘cannot be separated from the horizontal surveillance of peer group scrutiny’.

Research on call-centre work extended these arguments by demonstrating how electronic systems record and monitor interactions, generating performance data that some interpreted as approaching a panoptic form of control (Ferne and Metcalf, 1998). Other scholars, however, highlighted the limits of surveillance-based explanations, documenting informal resistance and showing that monitoring alone cannot secure compliance without wider forms of normative and cultural management (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Callaghan and Thompson, 2001). These debates are important because they show that surveillance is not itself a complete explanation of control; rather, it operates as one element within broader organisational processes through which behaviour is shaped.

A further development concerns the internalisation of control within work groups themselves. Barker’s (1993) study of self-managing teams provides an empirical account of concertive control, in which workers, having been granted greater autonomy, collectively develop and enforce the value-based rules governing their own conduct. Barker argues that this form of control can become more constraining than the bureaucratic systems it replaces, tightening rather than loosening the ‘iron cage’, because it is exercised through peers and experienced as self-imposed. Team members, he concludes, had become ‘their own masters and their own slaves’ (Barker, 1993:433).

Concertive and normative control are particularly relevant to teaching, where strong sense of vocation to support students and colleagues can become incorporated into systems of regulation. Barker’s description of shared values becoming enforceable norms resonates with Elder-Vass’s (2010) concept of norm circles, which is developed theoretically and applied empirically in Chapters 4 and 9 respectively. Under these conditions, surveillance does not necessarily operate

as external coercion; it becomes embedded within the everyday routines through which teachers account for themselves and one another.

Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011) develop the concept of ‘digital Taylorism’ to argue that central elements of Taylorism have been extended through digital systems into knowledge and service work. Labour processes previously considered resistant to Taylorist organisation can now be made auditable through technologies that translate ‘knowledge work...into working knowledge by capturing, codifying, and digitalising their work in software...that can be transferred and manipulated by others...’ (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011:72). Although this argument has been developed most prominently in relation to contemporary platform labour, similar dynamics are increasingly visible in schools, where monitoring and accountability functions are mediated through digital dashboards. As Roper (2025:57) observes, the managerial function of monitoring and control ‘may itself be displaced by technology’ through algorithms and artificial intelligence.

Research on platform labour further demonstrates how digital systems shape worker behaviour through the continuous collection and processing of performance data, producing what Kellogg, Valentine and Christin (2020) describe as algorithmic control (see Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Wood et al., 2019). In these accounts, platforms do not simply coordinate work; they encode expectations about *how* work should be performed, narrowing the scope for individual judgment while expanding the range of activities that can be measured.

Considered alongside the labour process tradition, digital Taylorism therefore represents less a break with earlier forms of labour control than their relocation into a new technological environment. Deskilling no longer occurs primarily through manufacturing organisations but through digital infrastructures that increasingly extend measurement and oversight into professional and knowledge-based roles.

Although much of this scholarship focuses on private-sector workplaces, these theoretical developments have direct relevance for state-maintained schools. The introduction of digital technologies into teachers’ work, regardless of their perceived pedagogical value, reshape relationships between skill, discretion and control. Tasks historically undertaken through individual professional judgment, such as setting and assessing student work, can become progressively reorganised into standardised and measurable routines. Such changes contribute to what Ball (2003) describes as the ‘terrors of performativity’, in which teachers become increasingly responsible for demonstrating alignment with externally defined measures of effectiveness.

The platformisation of English state schools can therefore be understood as an education-specific extension of longer transformations in the organisation and control of work. Digital platforms do not introduce managerial oversight where none previously existed. It makes it easier, by extending

established forms of labour control through new forms of visibility. Recognising this continuity avoids treating digital platforms as unprecedented developments and situates them instead within a broader history of labour control and the restructuring of professional work. The surveillance dimension of this argument is developed further in the following section.

2.4.5 Surveillance, power and panoptic visibility

Having traced how managerial control in digitally mediated school environments increasingly depends on the continuous monitoring of work, this section develops that analysis through wider debates on surveillance, discipline and visibility. It is important at the outset to distinguish between control and surveillance. Although closely related and often conflated, they refer to different processes. In this thesis, control refers to the organisational mechanisms through which effort, conduct and compliance are directed and secured, drawing on the labour process literature discussed above (Friedman, 1977; Edwards, 1979). Surveillance refers to the systematic collection, processing and use of information about organisational members in ways that make their activities visible and available for intervention (Lyon, 2007). Although surveillance has become an important means through which control is exercised in increasingly data-intensive schools, it is not reducible to control itself. By generating records of activity over time, surveillance creates new forms of visibility through which teachers' actions can be observed.

A further distinction between power, control and discipline clarifies the relationship between these concepts and connects the discussion to the Foucauldian lens adopted in this thesis. For Foucault (1977), power is not simply something possessed by particular actors or institutions; rather, it is relational, and embedded within social practices. Discipline represents a specific historical form of power that operates through hierarchical observation and normalising judgment, producing self-regulating subjects. Its defining illustration is Bentham's panopticon, in which the possibility of observation is sufficient to encourage conformity (Bentham, 1995; Foucault, 1977). Managerial control, by contrast, concerns the more direct top-down organisation of the labour process discussed in the previous section. Digital platforms extend processes of visibility beyond the physical school building. For example, teachers at Matson Academy described accessing school systems from home during evenings and weekends through a school-provided secure virtual private network (VPN), illustrating how digital technologies blur the spatial and temporal boundaries of organisational control.

The disciplinary logic described above also helps to explain how particular forms of subjectivity are produced. For Foucault, power does not simply restrict action; it contributes to the formation of individuals as particular kinds of subjects. He terms this process *subjectivation*: the simultaneous process through which individuals become subject to external forms of regulation while developing capacities for self-regulation (Foucault, 1977; 1982). Under panoptic conditions, the central mechanism is the internalisation of the possibility of observation. As individuals do not

know when they are being watched, they begin to continually monitor and regulate their own conduct. Surveillance can, it should be said, be productive as well as restrictive. Encouraging teachers' actions towards beneficial outcomes for the school and/or its students.

This insight has been developed within organisation studies and human resource management, although later scholarship has questioned the extent to which HR alone functions as the primary site of disciplinary power. Townley (1994), for example, conceptualises human resource management as a disciplinary apparatus through which employees become measurable. Knights and Willmott (1989) similarly show how labour processes produce not only compliant behaviour but particular forms of worker identity. These perspectives support the notion that platform-generated data are not neutral representations of teaching. They contribute to the production of a particular teacher-subject. Teachers are increasingly aware that they should align their actions to the criteria through which their performance is now evaluated. This relationship between surveillance and subject formation is developed further in Chapter 4 (see 4.9), where subjectivation is examined alongside calculative practices and disciplinary techniques.

Zuboff's (1988) work provides an important bridge between labour process theory and surveillance studies. She argues that information technology does not simply automate existing activities but also 'informs' them: 'Activities, events, and objects are translated into and made visible by information when a technology informs as well as automates' (Zuboff, 1988:10). This process produces what she terms an information panopticon, in which the conversion of work into data transforms relationships between workers and managerial authority. For this thesis, the significance of Zuboff's argument lies less in her later account of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) than in the more fundamental insight that digital systems make professional activity recordable and legible to management, making it increasingly open to managerial control and governance.

These conceptual foundations bring into focus the changing organisation of visibility within schools. Digital infrastructures extend longstanding forms of surveillance through everyday administrative systems, where the language of evidence-based practice has legitimised data collection and analysis as central components of school improvement. Yet such systems may also narrow the scope of professional discretion by shifting elements of judgment towards the platforms through which teachers' work is compared (Williamson, 2017b; Ball, 2021). Presented as tools of efficiency and accountability, digital systems can gradually reshape the relationship between professional expertise and organisational oversight.

Within these digitally mediated environments, the panoptic logic identified by Foucault is expressed through continuously available data dashboards and monitoring systems, but its significance extends beyond technical functionality towards questions of governance. As Gronn (2003:8) observes, New Public Management reforms displaced direct supervision with 'discursive

disciplinary and surveillance rubrics of quality assurance and performance targeting'. Beer (2019) similarly describes the intensification of the data gaze through which organisations are increasingly governed. Digital platforms therefore embed accountability within routine practices of school work, producing potential benefits in terms of coordination and record-keeping while simultaneously expanding opportunities for managerial intervention and alignment with measurable indicators.

The adequacy of the panopticon as a metaphor for contemporary surveillance has, however, been questioned. Haggerty and Ericson (2000) argue that contemporary surveillance is increasingly dispersed and networked rather than organised around a single observing centre. Instead of a panoptic tower, multiple systems combine to generate 'data doubles': digital representations constructed from fragments of information that can be circulated and recombined in ways the original panoptic model does not fully capture. Boyne (2000) similarly argues that the emergence of a self-monitoring subject is often assumed rather than empirically demonstrated, suggesting that simulation and prediction may increasingly supplement disciplinary normalisation. Lyon (2007) further cautions against treating surveillance as inherently totalising, emphasising that it can serve purposes of care and protection as well as control, and that it is continually negotiated and resisted. These critiques do not invalidate a disciplinary analysis of digital platforms, but they caution against treating visibility as automatically producing compliance. Instead, they reinforce the argument developed in the labour process literature: surveillance creates new possibilities for organisational power, but its effects remain dependent on the social and institutional contexts in which it operates. Visibility is therefore not itself control; rather, it provides a condition through which particular forms of control may be enacted.

Read through the labour process tradition developed above, these developments represent transformation rather than separation. Digital platforms do not introduce surveillance, deskilling or normative control where none previously existed; rather, they extend and intensify established forms of power within a more data-intensive environment. Distinguishing surveillance from control, and discipline from the broader operation of power, allows the analysis that follows to specify more precisely how these mechanisms operate within the case-study schools. These issues are developed further in Chapter 3, which examines platform power, digital governance and the expansion of data-driven schooling.

2.4.6 Spatial architecture and management

The literatures considered so far in this chapter have said relatively little about physical space. For this thesis, however, space is not simply a neutral backdrop against which school activity occurs. Organisation studies has developed a substantial body of work demonstrating that space is socially produced and organisationally consequential (Lefebvre, 1991; Taylor and Spicer, 2007; Dale and Burrell, 2007). Alongside this, research in organisation and technology studies has increasingly

drawn attention to the relationship between material arrangements and social practices through debates on sociomateriality (Orlikowski, 2007; Dale, 2005). Although these represent distinct intellectual lineages, both challenge the view of material environments as passive settings. Instead, they emphasise that material arrangements both shape, and are shaped by, organisational activity.

A school corridor, shared team room, or absent staffroom is not merely a physical arrangement; each embodies social relations; it influences how, and with whom, teachers interact in the course of their work. Although this thesis does not adopt a fully Lefebvrian framework, it draws on the broader argument that spatial arrangements shape what people do, how they relate to one another and how professional roles are experienced. More specifically, it adopts the critical-realist interpretation of sociomateriality advanced by Mutch (2013), in which social and material dimensions possess distinct properties while becoming closely interwoven in practice. This position aligns with the stratified ontology and analytical dualism developed in Chapter 4, unlike approaches that treat the social and material as ontologically inseparable. To argue that space conditions conduct is therefore not to treat it as a fixed or passive setting, but to recognise that its effects are produced and reproduced through social processes. Space is, therefore, treated as a conditioning factor and an object of analysis in its own right.

The effects of spatial organisation operate across several dimensions. Materially, the layout of a school shapes movement and patterns of interaction, influencing who comes into contact with whom and how frequently (Elsbach and Pratt, 2007). Symbolically, space communicates organisational priorities and influences belonging, identity and perceptions of value (Dale and Burrell, 2007). Elsbach and Pratt (2007:181) capture this plurality by distinguishing between the ‘instrumental’, ‘symbolic’ and ‘aesthetic’ functions that spatial arrangements may perform simultaneously. Relationally, shared spaces provide opportunities for informal communication through which trust and professional knowledge are collectively understood and reproduced. Their existence or absence therefore shapes how school cultures and communities develop by directly affecting opportunities for collective support.

Baldry’s (1999:536) study of office environments demonstrates that workplace space is inseparable from social relations; ‘it facilitates managerial control over the labour process...co-ordination...and the construction of systems of surveillance.’ The design of organisational space has long been recognised as a mechanism of control. From the factory floor to the open-plan office, spatial arrangements have been used to channel behaviours towards the expectations of management (Parker and Jeacle, 2019; Taylor and Spicer, 2007). Taylor and Spicer’s (2007:7) description of space as being engineered to produce ‘environments that enable easy visual surveillance and control’ closely reflects Foucault’s (1977) analysis of disciplinary space, where the ordering and partitioning of space become central techniques through which conduct is shaped.

The relationship between space, technology and control is also present in the transition towards digitally mediated forms of work. Research on remote and flexible working demonstrates that changes in workplace location reshape the boundaries between work and non-work life (Felstead, Jewson and Walters, 2005; Halford, 2005). These developments provide a useful parallel for this thesis. Remote working has often been presented as a more autonomous alternative to office-based organisation, reducing the constraints of shared physical spaces and direct managerial oversight. Yet the removal of physical proximity may also introduce new forms of digital monitoring, as visibility is transferred from shared workplaces into systems that record and analyse activity. As Halford (2005:26) observes, workers may become ‘far more acutely aware that they may be subject to scrutiny...from peers and managers’. Zuboff’s (1988) concept of the information panopticon anticipates this transformation: as work becomes dispersed and informed, surveillance is not removed but relocated into the digital infrastructures through which activity becomes visible. Spatial flexibility can paradoxically intensify forms of organisational control.

Shared spaces such as staffrooms, department workrooms, offices, and corridors have long played a role in school life that extends beyond their practical function. They are relational settings through which school culture, teacher identity, professional support and staff voice are sustained (Frelin and Grannäs, 2014; Helsby, 1999). Frelin and Grannäs (2014) describe such environments as relational spaces as the social glue in which trust, mutual support and shared understandings develop through everyday interactions. The reorganisation of these spaces, whether through the removal of communal areas, the dispersal of staff into individual classrooms, or changes to the location of leadership offices, is therefore not simply an administrative decision. It fundamentally alters the conditions under which professional relationships are formed and reproduced.

Where spatial restructuring coincides with the expansion of digital platforms, these processes may reinforce one another. As opportunities for informal interaction decrease, communication and coordination may increasingly shift to digital systems, where activities become more auditable. The result is a spatial-digital configuration in which horizontal, informal forms of exchange in schools are displaced by more visible and traceable forms of interaction, albeit in a digital realm.

Despite its importance, the spatial dimension of school organisation remains relatively underdeveloped within educational governance research, which has focused more extensively on policy, accountability and, increasingly, datafication. Where space has been considered, it has often been examined in relation to pedagogy or the built environment rather than teacher work and digital control. The relationship between spatial organisation and digital governance has received comparatively little sustained attention (Gulson and Sellar, 2019).

This thesis therefore treats space as both a causal and conditioning factor. Following Marxist and Lefebvrian conceptions of space, and adopting a critical realist position informed by Archer and Elder-Vass, spatial arrangements are understood as relatively enduring structural conditions that

are analytically distinct from the agents who occupy them. Although spatial configurations are historically and socially produced through human action, once established they possess emergent properties that shape, without determining, teachers' interactions, identities, and the forms of professional discretion available to them. This analytical distinction between structure and agency makes it possible to examine how spatial arrangements, alongside managerial surveillance and digital platforms, exercise causal influence over teachers' conduct over time without reducing action to structural determination. This approach enables the empirical analysis of spatial differences between schools that retain or dismantle shared settings, or relocate senior staff, to be interpreted not as incidental organisational details but as part of a wider explanation of how platform governance is enacted and experienced.

Situating these developments within organisation studies on space achieves two purposes. First, it establishes that the spatial findings of this study belong to a wider field of research on the organisation of work. Second, it demonstrates that digital infrastructures cannot be understood separately from the material environments in which they operate. Rather than treating the social and the material as ontologically inseparable, this thesis examines their interaction through an analytically dualist framework in which material arrangements condition, but do not determine, social action. The platform governance examined throughout this thesis operates not only through data systems but through the spatial and organisational arrangements that shape the institutional value subsequently attributed to data. The empirical chapters accordingly treat spatial and digital reconfiguration as interconnected dimensions of the same governance process, the conceptual foundations of which are developed further in Chapter 4.

2.5 Teacher autonomy and shifting regimes of accountability

Debates about teacher autonomy in England have long centred on the extent to which teachers can exercise professional judgment within increasingly regulated institutional environments (Hoyle and Wallace, 2014). This section traces how that discretion has been progressively reconfigured since the mid-twentieth century. Section 2.5.1 first establishes the nature of the teaching labour process, the professional identity associated with it, and the managerial pressures that subsequently reshaped it. The subsections that follow distinguish three broad phases identified in the literature: relative, controlled and productive autonomy, which provide the historical context through which contemporary digitally mediated forms of accountability can be understood (Gleeson and Gunter, 2001).

2.5.1 The teaching labour process, professional identity and managerialism

Understanding the conditions of platform governance requires first establishing how teachers' work was organised before digital platforms became embedded within schools. As the argument

developed later in this thesis concerns a transformation in how teaching is monitored and evaluated; this transformation can only be understood in relation to the labour process from which it emerged. For much of the post-war period, teaching in England was characterised by relatively self-contained classroom practice, with administration conducted largely through paper-based systems. Registers, markbooks, schemes of work, lesson plans and student records were typically maintained locally by teachers, departments or individual schools rather than through centralised data infrastructures (Lawn, 1996; Hoyle and John, 1995). Much of what might now be understood as pedagogical data were situated within teachers' own individual judgment about their own working practices.

These arrangements were supported by the material and spatial organisation of schools. Staffrooms, department offices and shared working spaces were not simply locations in which teachers happened to work; they provided the social glue through which professional relationships were sustained. This is not to suggest that pre-digital schooling represented an uncontested utopia of teacher autonomy. Rather, it establishes the occupational settlement against which later developments can be understood: one in which professional discretion was comparatively more closely associated with classroom expertise and trust than with continuous external measurement.

The labour process tradition provides the conceptual framework for interpreting both this earlier settlement and the pressures subsequently placed upon it. Braverman's (1974) account of deskilling, and the debates that followed, were developed primarily in relation to industrial labour, but later scholarship extended these arguments to professional and white-collar occupations, including teaching. Writers working in this field have characterised teaching as a labour process repeatedly subject to attempts to separate the planning of work from its enactment and to formalise individual judgment through standardised procedures (Lawn, 1996; Apple, 1986, 2005; Avis, 2005). From this perspective, teachers are not only professionals exercising expertise but also workers whose autonomy is shaped by a school's control over the labour process.

This distinction is important because it places the developments examined in this thesis within a longer history of contestation over knowledge, skill and authority. Digital platforms do not introduce these tensions into education; rather, they represent a more recent technological expression of longstanding efforts to make work measurable and, therefore, more governable. The professional identity associated with this earlier labour process in teaching was grounded less in formal accountability systems than in pedagogical expertise and a degree of trusted discretion over classroom practice.

Hoyle's (1974) distinction between professionalism, referring to the collective status and standing of an occupation, and professionalism, referring to the knowledge, skills and judgment deployed by practitioners, provides a useful way of understanding this relationship. For much of this period, teacher identity was closely tied to their exercise of professionalism and subject knowledge within

the classroom, often supported by collegial norms rather than extensive external scrutiny (Hoyle and John, 1995; Helsby, 1995).

This professional identity was, however, never fixed or uncontested. Evans (2008) distinguishes between the demanded and prescribed dimensions of professionalism and the forms of professionalism enacted by practitioners, arguing that these have increasingly diverged. Helsby (1999) similarly demonstrates that teacher professionalism has always been subject to competing interpretations and political projects. The significance of the period before widespread digitalisation is therefore not that teachers enjoyed complete autonomy, but that the relationship between their judgment and local school accountability was more ambiguous.

From the late twentieth century onwards, this relationship was reshaped by the emergence of managerial approaches to public-sector organisation. Clarke and Newman (1997) describe the development of a managerial state in which, seemingly, bureaucratic cultures within public institutions were supplanted by principles of measurement and control in the name of efficiency. Within education, Robert Archer (2002:1) argues that the 1988 Education Reform Act institutionalised a new managerialism that created an ‘objective contradiction’ with the earlier ‘child-centred philosophy’, as schools became increasingly governed through market mechanisms that embraced targets and accountability systems.

Drawing on Margaret Archer’s (1995) morphogenetic framework, Robert Archer (2002) does not present this transformation as a straightforward imposition of managerialism. Instead, he demonstrates how teachers actively mediate tensions between established pedagogical commitments and emerging accountability demands. Although his analysis focuses on primary education, the broader process he identifies: the mediation of competing student-centred and managerial demands, is directly relevant to the argument developed here. Across state education more broadly, marketisation and New Public Management reforms increasingly reframe professional autonomy as something to be audited through inspection and targets (Apple, 2005). Ball’s (2003) concept of the ‘terrors of performativity’ captures the consequences of this shift, as teachers became increasingly required to demonstrate effectiveness through externally defined measures of performance.

A further component of this transformation concerns the changing material organisation of teachers’ work. The movement from paper-based practices towards digitally mediated environments represents more than a technological shift; it reshapes the routines, spaces and forms of visibility through which professional work is enacted. Research in the sociology of work demonstrates that workplace arrangements are constitutive of occupational relations rather than merely their setting (Baldry, 1999). Similarly, Zuboff’s (1988) concept of informed work shows how the digital production of information about work reshapes relationships between workers and managerial oversight. Research on digitally mediated and dispersed working environments further

demonstrates how changing workplace arrangements reshape professional relationships and practices (Felstead, Jewson and Walters, 2005). Although these studies are not focused specifically on schools, their implications are significant. When the systems and spaces through which teachers' work is organised are transformed, the relationships and forms of discretion sustained through those arrangements are also affected. The displacement of staffroom-based, paper-mediated practice towards platform-mediated work in the case-study schools should be understood as part of a broader reorganisation of labour.

Although not exhaustive, these literatures help to establish the historical baseline against which platform governance should be interpreted. Teaching was historically organised around a form of professional discretion sustained through expertise and trust within shared occupational settings, although this settlement was itself contested and uneven. Managerialism, marketisation and performativity progressively altered this relationship by introducing stronger regimes of measurement and accountability. Digital platforms do not create these conditions; rather, they extend and intensify them by transforming how teachers' work is now evaluated.

The following subsections trace this transformation more precisely through three broad phases: relative autonomy, controlled autonomy and productive autonomy, through which teacher discretion in England has been successively revised.

2.5.2 Relative autonomy

Early accounts portray the post-war teaching profession as one characterised by considerable professional discretion. Teachers were widely regarded as trusted professionals who exercised judgment over curriculum content, classroom practice and assessment with relatively limited external oversight (Hoyle, 1974; Lawn, 1996; Hoyle and John, 1995). Autonomy during this period was relational rather than absolute. Professional authority was sustained through collegial norms and shared occupational expectations rather than through formalised accountability mechanisms.

The authority of the classroom teacher rested largely on pedagogical expertise and established professional culture. Senior leaders and policymakers had few routine mechanisms through which the everyday conduct of teaching could be closely monitored. Variation in classroom practice was common and rarely regarded as problematic provided that teachers fulfilled their basic institutional responsibilities. The autonomy of this period therefore reflected both the absence of extensive accountability systems and a broader policy environment that largely took professional discretion for granted.

2.5.3 Controlled autonomy

The Education Reform Act 1988 marked a significant turning point in this professional settlement. The introduction of the National Curriculum, alongside national testing and league tables, created a more tightly structured policy environment. Teachers continued to implement curriculum and assessment practices in their classrooms, yet these activities were increasingly framed by national standards and externally defined benchmarks (Gleeson and Gunter, 2001).

During this period, managerial oversight within schools also expanded. Senior leaders were tasked with implementing national reforms, monitoring outcomes and ensuring institutional compliance with statutory requirements. Teachers retained a degree of professional judgment, but their decisions were expected to align with standardised frameworks and measurable outputs. Autonomy was therefore not eliminated but reconfigured into a more constrained space in which professional discretion existed within clearly defined policy parameters.

2.5.4 Productive autonomy

A further shift occurred during the late 1990s and early 2000s as reforms associated with New Labour and New Public Management intensified the emphasis on performance and accountability. Scholars characterise this phase as productive autonomy, in which teachers were encouraged to demonstrate initiative, adaptability and innovation while simultaneously aligning their practice with organisational goals (Gleeson and Gunter, 2001; Ball, 2003).

In these reforms developed, autonomy became closely connected to forms of self-regulation. Teachers were expected to monitor their own performance, reflect on outcomes and continually improve their practice in line with institutional targets. Beck (2008) describes this development as a form of governmental professionalism in which professional identity becomes increasingly tied to organisational accountability.

The expansion of performance management systems, target-setting processes and data-driven evaluation embedded teachers within more formalised accountability structures (Fidler, 1995; Lingard, Sellar and Lewis, 2017). Autonomy was reframed as a professional responsibility: teachers were expected to demonstrate initiative and reflective practice while remaining accountable for measurable results (Lipman, 2008; Avis, 2005). In this context, discretion was valued primarily when it contributed to demonstrable institutional outcomes.

2.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has examined how the governance of English secondary schooling has developed through successive waves of neoliberal reform and New Public Management. These reforms reconfigured education as a quasi-market, expanded data-driven accountability and laid the foundations for the strengthening of managerial oversight within schools. Processes such as academisation, performativity and managerial restructuring did more than alter organisational arrangements; they changed the conditions under which teachers' work is monitored. The chapter also located these developments within the labour process tradition and the organisation studies literature on space, showing how debates on technology, control and deskilling, and on the sociomaterial organisation of work, inform the analysis of platform governance that follows.

In this context, the emergence of what has been described as productive autonomy foreshadowed several dynamics that later became central to digitally mediated governance. Expectations of continuous monitoring, comparison and professional self-regulation were already embedded within school accountability systems before the widespread adoption of digital platforms. The reforms examined in this chapter therefore provide an important backdrop to the developments explored in the remainder of the thesis.

Table 2.1 is intended as a reference point that ties together the key topic strands contained in this chapter, identifying what the reviewed literature establishes, where significant gaps remain and how the thesis addresses them. This can be read alongside the comparable synthesis at the end of Chapter 3.

Literature review synthesis			
Topic	What the literature establishes	Gaps and limitations	How this thesis addresses them
Neoliberalism and New Public Management in schooling	- The restructuring of English schooling through neoliberal reform and NPM created quasi-market conditions, intensified performance monitoring and reoriented professional cultures towards measurable output. - Performativity regimes normalised data collection and comparison as mechanisms of professional oversight, pre-conditioning schools for digital governance before platform adoption. - The literature on neoliberalism and NPM is extensive at the macro level, but less attention has been paid to how these ideological frameworks shape the internal dynamics of schools themselves.	- The structural and political conditions creating the organisational context for platform governance are well documented, but the mechanisms by which those conditions translate into specific governance outcomes within individual schools remain underspecified. - Existing accounts treat NPM as a macro-level policy trajectory; its differential enactment across governance contexts (MAT vs LA) receives little empirical attention.	The comparative case design examines two schools operating under contrasting governance arrangements (MAT and LA), allowing the thesis to analyse how macro-level structural conditions are differentially mediated at the organisational level.
Academisation and the governance of MATs	- Academisation transferred governance authority from local authorities to MATs, concentrating managerial power and reducing democratic accountability. - Academisation produced significant variation in governance structures, creating a landscape in which MATs exercise degrees of centralised authority not available to LA-maintained schools. - The concentration of executive authority within MATs has been associated with reduced teacher voice, limited consultation on organisational change and the imposition of standardised systems.	- Scholarship on academisation has focused primarily on governance structures and policy outcomes; the effects of MAT governance on everyday digital management practices and teacher experience are empirically underdeveloped. - Comparative studies distinguishing between MAT and LA governance contexts in relation to digital platform adoption are almost entirely absent from literature.	The comparative design directly addresses this gap by examining platform governance in a MAT academy and a LA-maintained school, analysing how governance type conditions the embedding and enactment of digital systems.
Teacher autonomy under accountability regimes	Teacher autonomy has shifted progressively from the relative autonomy of the post-war settlement through controlled autonomy under NPM to productive autonomy, in which self-regulation is internalised as professional responsibility.	Most accounts treat teacher agency as a residual or reactive response to structural constraint; the varied and reflexive character of agency within digitally mediated environments receives less attention.	This thesis applies Archer's morphogenetic framework and Elder-Vass's norm circle theory to analyse teacher agency as a reflexively mediated response to structural and normative conditions, rather than a

	• Performativity and managerialism have contributed to rising workload, narrowed individual teacher discretion and a culture of anticipatory compliance.	• The role of organisational factors, leadership culture and spatio-material conditions in shaping the form that teacher agency takes represents a wider disciplinary gap, not yet systematically addressed in the organisational literature on schools.	straightforward reaction to policy pressure.
Technology, control and deskilling	• Labour process theory, from Marx and Taylor to Braverman's deskilling thesis and its critics (Friedman, Edwards and Burawoy), shows that managerial control is not uniform. It has shifted from direct supervision towards technical, bureaucratic and normative forms. • This analysis has been extended to knowledge and service work through accounts of digital Taylorism (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011) and algorithmic control, where planning and supervision are increasingly built into digital platforms. Control may also operate through peer-based concertive and normative pressures (Barker, 1993). • Surveillance has become an important, though contested, means of control. It can constrain conduct while encouraging workers to monitor themselves. Foucault's (1977) concept of panoptic visibility remains influential, although later scholars emphasise that surveillance is dispersed, multi-faceted and subject to everyday negotiation (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000; Boyne, 2000; Lyon, 2007).	• Sociological and labour process accounts of technology, deskilling and control are largely drawn from industrial, corporate and, more recently, platform and gig-economy settings; their application to schools as organisations remains underdeveloped. • Panoptic frameworks tend to flatten the complexity of power, treating visibility as uniformly coercive and leaving little room for contextual variation or agential response.	This thesis situates digital governance in schools within this broader critical tradition while moving beyond panoptic frameworks, using critical realism to identify context-specific mechanisms and norm circles to capture normative, rather than purely disciplinary, forms of control.
Space, materiality and organisational control	• Organisation studies shows that space is not a neutral setting for work. It is produced through the interaction of material arrangements and social practice, and it can shape organisational power relations (Lefebvre, 1991; Dale and Burrell, 2007; Dale, 2005; Orlikowski, 2007). • Spatial arrangements have practical, symbolic and relational effects (Elsbach and Pratt,	• The educational governance literature has concentrated on policy, accountability and datafication, leaving the spatial and material conditions of professional work comparatively neglected; where space is addressed, it is usually considered in relation to pedagogy or the built environment rather than to the work of teachers and organisational control.	This thesis treats space as an active influence on teachers' work, while recognising that space is itself shaped through social and material practices. It examines how the loss of communal areas, the relocation of senior staff, and differences between schools that retained or

	2007). The design and organisation of workplaces have long been used to make activity visible and regulate conduct (Baldry, 1999; Parker and Jeacle, 2019; Taylor and Spicer, 2007; Foucault, 1977). • Research on dispersed work suggests that the loss of shared physical space is often accompanied by more intensive, technology-mediated monitoring (Felstead, Jewson and Walters, 2005; Halford, 2005). In schools, communal spaces can also sustain collegial relationships and professional identity (Frelin and Grannäs, 2014; Helsby, 1999).	• The interaction between the organisation of school space and digital governance has received little sustained attention (Gulson and Sellar, 2019).	removed shared spaces affect teachers' interactions and professional identities. Spatial and digital changes are understood as interconnected elements of the same process of governance.
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Table 2.1: Literature review synthesis – Chapter 2

3 Platform power, digital governance and the expansion of data-driven schooling

3.1 Introduction

Having established the political rationalities of how neoliberalism and New Public Management (NPM) have shaped the managerial mechanisms operating in schools, this chapter turns to the digital infrastructures and commercial actors that increasingly shape contemporary schooling. The focus shifts from the historical restructuring of governance to the ways in which educational technologies and data systems reorganise the conditions under which schools operate.

In this chapter, ‘EdTech’ refers to the commercial and policy environment within which educational software is marketed, whereas ‘digital platforms’ denotes the operational systems through which these logics become embedded in everyday school practice. The early sections (3.2–3.5) examine how private firms and technology providers have become increasingly involved in the organisation of schooling. Building on the processes of marketisation outlined in Chapter 2, the discussion considers the related but distinct dynamics of privatisation, commercialisation and platformisation. Although these concepts are often treated interchangeably, they describe different processes. Platformisation, in particular, introduces forms of governance that operate through infrastructure as much as through formal policy.

The later sections of the chapter (3.6–3.8) move from institutional developments to a more explicit examination of power and subjectivity. Drawing on debates surrounding surveillance capitalism and governmentality, the chapter explores how digital infrastructures function as mechanisms of monitoring and behavioural steering. Platforms do not simply record activity; they organise it by making professional practice more comparable and therefore susceptible to intervention. The chapter therefore develops a conceptual vocabulary for analysing digital governance in schools. Rather than treating platforms as neutral technological tools, it approaches them as socio-technical infrastructures through which market logics become embedded in the everyday conduct of teaching.

3.2 Commercial opportunism and the platformisation of education

Although EdTech firms were already expanding within education prior to COVID-19 (Selwyn, 2016; van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018), the pandemic accelerated their financial and infrastructural entrenchment. What UNESCO (2023:261) describe as a ‘site of intense financial activity and speculation’ quickly emerged as education was reframed as a significant commercial opportunity. Companies already established within the EdTech sector experienced rapid growth, while new entrants capitalised on the urgent demand for digital systems capable of supporting remote teaching and organisational coordination.

These developments did not arise suddenly. For several decades, venture capital networks and technology investors had been laying the groundwork for scalable, data-intensive educational platforms (Singer, 2017a). The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, however, intensified this trajectory. Williamson, Eynon and Potter (2020) argue that technology providers actively leveraged the disruption of school closures to consolidate their presence within state education systems. The result was not simply a temporary surge in demand but a deeper restructuring of the market. Analysts increasingly point to a ‘winner-takes-most’ dynamic in which a small number of dominant firms expand rapidly while smaller competitors struggle to maintain visibility. In classroom infrastructure, companies such as Google, Microsoft and Apple consolidated their position, while specialist providers including Satchel One and Arbor significantly expanded their user bases (Cavanagh, 2017; HolonIQ, 2022a). This concentration of influence raises broader questions about institutional dependency and the governance of core educational infrastructures. Market forecasts at the time reflected these expectations: BMO Capital Markets predicted that firms ‘specialising in online education could see increased interest should the situation worsen’ (EdSurge, 2020, para. 2), highlighting the speculative logic through which educational disruption was interpreted as an opportunity for investment.

Global investment data illustrates the scale of this expansion. Venture capital funding for EdTech more than doubled in 2020, rising from USD 7 billion to USD 16.1 billion (Fleming, 2021), and exceeded USD 20 billion by 2021 (HolonIQ, 2022a). This influx of capital produced a growing number of ‘unicorn’ companies, with valuations above USD 1 billion increasing from 20 to 36 between October 2020 and July 2022 (HolonIQ, 2022b). The growth of the sector was not confined to Europe and North America. Significant investment flowed into markets across China, India and parts of Africa, where high levels of mobile connectivity and expanding digital infrastructure created favourable conditions for rapid expansion (Chebib, 2020). These developments reflect what Verger, Steiner-Khamsi and Lubienski (2017:325) describe as the ‘supra-national’ expansion of the global education industry (GEI), in which profit-oriented actors increasingly embed themselves within both the infrastructure of state education systems.

The pandemic also accelerated horizontal expansion across a wider array of actors and services. As Terrisse (2020, cited in UNESCO, 2023:264) observes, beneficiaries included not only established technology firms already operating in education but also a growing number of start-ups and multi-purpose technology companies with limited experience of teaching and learning. The boundaries between public service provision and commercial infrastructure consequently became less distinct. UNESCO (2023:264) note that schooling during the pandemic was ‘running headfirst into digitalisation’, with new digital ecosystems emerging that were ‘mostly private and for-profit’. While these developments had been unfolding gradually for some time, the emergency conditions of 2020–21 significantly accelerated them. As a result, questions about how education is organised increasingly intersect with questions about who owns, controls and profits from the digital infrastructures on which schooling now depends.

Verger, Lubienski and Steiner-Khamsi (2016) describe this emerging landscape as the global education industry: a dense network of actors, services and governance arrangements through which commercial logics shape the organisation of schooling. Firms compete for market share, and for influence over the norms and expectations surrounding educational technology. Companies such as BYJU in India illustrate this dynamic, leveraging demographic change and digital expansion to secure dominant positions within emerging EdTech markets (Chebib, 2020). In this context, as Verger et al. (2017:336) observe, ‘power practices and dynamics are at the centre’ of educational restructuring. Corporate actors increasingly shape the design and distribution of the digital systems that underpin school activity. This concentration of influence can be understood as a form of platform power: the capacity of dominant providers to shape pedagogical routines in schools and influence educational priorities. Market concentration therefore does more than alter the commercial landscape of EdTech; it also embeds corporate logics and technical standards within the infrastructures through which teaching and the management of schools are organised.

3.3 From public good to data commodity

The rapid expansion of educational technology during the pandemic did more than facilitate remote learning. It also altered how education itself is organised and valued. Digital platforms operate not simply as technical tools but as infrastructures through which interactions between users are structured and recorded. As van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018:4) observe, platforms are ‘programmable digital architecture designed to organise interactions between users – not just end users but also corporate entities and public bodies.’ Their design enables the continuous capture and processing of user data, allowing educational activity to be translated into measurable and analysable information. The growing reliance on digital systems contributes to a shift in which educational processes increasingly generate data that can be operationalised within wider digital economies. UNESCO (2023:261) suggest that one lasting effect of the pandemic was the reframing of education as a sector ‘ripe for business expansion and profit generation.’

Foucault's (1977:170) analysis of disciplinary power helps clarify how the data infrastructures described above extend visibility within school organisations. He argues that disciplinary power often relies on 'simple instruments' such as hierarchical observation and normalising judgment. Digital platforms provide precisely these forms of visibility by enabling educational activity to be comparable at scale. Although proponents emphasise the efficiencies associated with these tools (Lewin et al., 2019), their technical capabilities are inseparable from their role in extending managerial oversight.

This development reflects broader structural trends rather than a temporary response to crisis conditions. As Thrun (cited in Lohr, 2020) notes, periods of disruption often accelerate existing technological trajectories. Within education, the rapid adoption of digital systems reinforced policy orientations already associated with neoliberal reform. Williamson and Hogan (2020) argue that the platformisation of schooling is connected to wider policy agendas that prioritise efficiency and market-orientated approaches to education, highlighting the growing presentation of technological solutionism. In such conditions, schools are increasingly expected to procure digital platforms whose routine use generates data that can be analysed or repurposed within commercial settings.

Privatisation and commercialisation, though often conflated, are analytically distinct, a distinction developed more fully below. Ball (2007:24) describes the process of commercialisation when he refers to the 're-working [of] forms of service, social relations and public processes into forms that are measurable and thus contractable or marketable.' Rowe (2019:275) extends this analysis by suggesting that datafication increasingly shapes how educational success is measured and consumed, positioning 'education as a transaction' within broader market relations.

These developments are not confined to England. Across many education systems, digital platforms have facilitated new relationships between public institutions and private providers. Sellar (2017, cited in Kerssens and van Dijck, 2021:251) describes a 'precarious reshuffling of corporate and public forces' through which the organisation of online educational spaces is continually renegotiated. Schools are frequently encouraged to adopt commercial platforms, purchase associated services and enter contractual relationships with technology providers. The capacity to negotiate such arrangements varies significantly across systems and institutions, raising concerns about uneven influence and access.

Hogan (2018) identifies three related processes that characterise this transformation: marketisation, privatisation and commercialisation. Marketisation refers to the application of market principles to public education; privatisation to the transfer of governance or service provision to private actors; commercialisation to the commodification of educational goods and services. Together these processes reshape the governance landscape of schooling. In England this shift has been reinforced by the academies programme discussed in Chapter 2, which reduced the

role of local authority oversight and introduced new governance arrangements within academy trusts. These structural changes have created additional space for private actors to influence the broader infrastructure of education provision.

Comparative research highlights how these dynamics unfold through digital systems. Cone and Brøgger (2020) use the term soft privatisation to describe the gradual embedding of private actors within public education through technological infrastructures rather than through direct asset transfer. During the pandemic this often occurred through rapid platform procurement and emergency data-sharing arrangements that bypassed established consultation. Although countries such as Germany, Sweden and Italy maintained different regulatory frameworks, a similar pattern emerged: technology firms gained accelerated access to public education systems during the crisis.

Soft privatisation may be less visible than formal privatisation, yet its implications can be significant. The provision of digital platforms by private companies fundamentally influences how education is organised. These systems routinely collect and analyse information about teacher and student activity. As platforms become embedded within everyday school operations, they increasingly function as core infrastructures of schooling. This raises important questions about the long-term governance of educational data and about the institutional dependence that may develop around privately controlled digital systems.

3.4 National policy, market-making and platform governance

The marketisation of education in England has not emerged solely from global technological change. As discussed in Chapter 2, it has also been actively shaped by national policy. Over several decades, successive governments have introduced reforms that encourage the participation of private providers within the schooling system. Policy discourse has therefore played an important role in establishing the conditions under which commercial actors, including EdTech companies, can operate within state education. As Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan (2015, n.p.) framed the expansion of academies as a transfer of authority away from what she described as the ‘old educational establishment’. In this account, academisation is presented not simply as organisational reform but as a means of opening schooling to new forms of competition and innovation.

These developments reflect the broader neoliberal orientation of contemporary governance. The concept of governmentality provides a way of understanding how policy can reshape institutional behaviour through economic rationalities rather than direct command. For Foucault, government extends beyond the formal administration of the state to encompass the wider ‘conduct of conduct’ through which behaviour is shaped and directed (Lemke, 2002:50). Within neoliberal policy frameworks the state does not withdraw from social provision but instead reorganises its role.

Rather than acting primarily as a provider of services, it increasingly operates as regulator and market-maker, establishing conditions that encourage competition and private-sector participation.

English education policy illustrates this transformation clearly. Schools are formally granted greater autonomy, yet they remain embedded within systems of performance measurement, funding incentives and procurement arrangements that shape organisational behaviour. Within academy trusts, for example, pressures for efficiency and consistency often encourage the adoption of standardised digital systems across multiple schools. Such developments illustrate how market-oriented governance can coexist with highly structured forms of oversight. The adoption of shared digital platforms within Multi-Academy Trusts frequently reflects leadership priorities for coordination and data visibility as much as technological necessity.

In this context the state continues to play a central role in shaping technological adoption. Rather than withdrawing from education, government policy often facilitates the expansion of private providers by structuring the conditions under which schools procure digital services. Mazzucato (2018) challenges the axiomatic assumption that innovation is driven primarily by private enterprise, arguing that many technological advances depend on substantial public investment and policy support. This insight is particularly relevant to the EdTech sector, where public funding, procurement frameworks and policy initiatives have helped embed digital systems within schools.

Statements from policymakers illustrate how these ambitions are articulated. Morgan (2015, n.p.) described the next phase of education reform as requiring ‘that same determination... to embrace and shape the next stage of our reform programme’. Central to this vision is the expectation that technology providers will play a leading role in delivering innovation and efficiency within schooling. Similar ideas appear in proposals from large academy trusts such as Ark Schools (Bennett, 2016), which advocate expanded online learning and new organisational models that reduce staffing costs and reorganise school provision around blended learning environments.

Government strategy documents further reinforce this alignment between educational policy and commercial development. The Department for Education’s strategy *Realising the Potential of Technology in Education* explicitly combines ambitions for digital transformation in schools with support for a ‘world-leading EdTech business sector’ (DfE, 2019:27). The document emphasises the need to ‘facilitate a better marketplace where schools, colleges and other providers can buy with confidence, whilst also making it more efficient and effective for businesses to gain their route to market’ (ibid.:27). The strategy therefore seeks not only to increase technological adoption but also to improve market conditions for technology firms seeking to expand within education.

Such policies illustrate a broader shift in governance. Schools are increasingly expected to operate within environments structured by market principles, technological innovation and performance-based accountability. Within these arrangements digital platforms function not merely as tools for

educational practice but as infrastructures that shape organisational behaviour. By embedding data collection and standardised performance metrics within the daily operations of schools, platforms become integral to the way governance is enacted.

As digital systems become more deeply embedded within schooling, the boundaries between public provision and commercial infrastructure become less distinct. Platform governance therefore reflects a wider reorganisation of educational authority in which technological infrastructures and market incentives increasingly interact with institutional priorities to shape the conduct of schooling.

3.5 Capital, infrastructure and the digital reordering of school systems

The rapid integration of digital platforms into English schools reflects more than pedagogical change. It also forms part of a wider economic transformation in how value is produced and extracted. As economies become increasingly oriented around intangible assets, the transition from paper-based administration to digital infrastructure represents a significant reorganisation of educational practice and governance. Haskel and Westlake (2017) argue that advanced economies are undergoing a structural shift from tangible capital – buildings, equipment, paper records – towards intangible assets such as software, data systems and organisational knowledge. This transition alters how institutions operate, how services are delivered and how value accumulates across different sectors.

In education, these developments have practical consequences for how schools are organised. Activities once mediated through physical artefacts such as staffrooms, filing systems and paper registers are now coordinated through digital platforms that manage lesson planning, homework submission, safeguarding records, timetabling and performance monitoring. As the OECD (2013:12) observes, this ‘non-tangible form of capital is, increasingly, the largest form of business investment and a key contributor to growth in advanced economies’. Rowe (2019:274) suggests that the rise of intangible capital therefore represents a departure from earlier ways of understanding economic organisation. In schools, administrative and managerial work is increasingly channelled through integrated digital systems that convert educational activity into structured data.

This transition has broader implications for institutional control. Srnicek (2016:96) characterises platform capitalism as a system in which corporations do not simply own information but increasingly control the infrastructures through which social activity occurs. Digital platforms operate as coordination systems that mediate communication, data collection and organisational processes. Christophers (2020) highlights the extractive dimensions of this model, noting that value is often generated not through the production of educational content but through control of

the interfaces that structure participation. Within schools, this dynamic means that everyday activities, from recording attendance to tracking assessment outcomes, are increasingly mediated by privately-owned digital systems.

Some commentators interpret these developments as part of a broader transformation in the structure of contemporary capitalism. Varoufakis (2023), for example, argues that digital platforms enable forms of economic power based on the control of infrastructure rather than traditional production processes. He describes this dynamic as ‘cloud rent’, referring to the fees extracted from organisations that become dependent on private-sector digital systems. In educational contexts this can appear in the form of subscription-based services or integrated platform ecosystems that become difficult for schools to replace once embedded in everyday practice.

Scholars of digital media emphasise that platforms should also be understood as socio-technical arrangements rather than purely technical systems. Gillespie, Boczkowski and Foot (2014:1) describe platforms as ‘the residue of societal ambitions’, reflecting the values and assumptions of those who design them. Their architecture shapes how users interact with information and with one another. Williamson (2017a:24) similarly argues that digital systems increasingly become ‘infrastructuralised’, meaning that they are woven into routine organisational activity to such an extent that they become largely taken for granted.

This process of infrastructural embedding has organisational consequences for schools. Communication between staff increasingly takes place through messaging systems or digital dashboards rather than through informal interaction. Monitoring student progress often occurs through standardised reporting interfaces, and professional development is increasingly channelled through online platforms such as BlueSky (see Chapter 6). Van Dijck and Poell (2015:1) describe these developments as part of a wider ‘platform society’ in which commercial infrastructures reshape the functioning of public institutions.

Understanding these transformations therefore requires attention to the interaction between technological design, institutional practice and broader economic structures. Fraser (2014) reminds us that contemporary systems of value creation operate simultaneously across economic, social and political domains. In educational settings, digital platforms are not only administrative tools but also as infrastructures that shape organisational expectations and professional conduct.

The shift from paper-based systems to digital platforms is therefore more than a technical adjustment. It reorganises how schools coordinate work, how information circulates and how professional activity becomes visible. As these infrastructures become embedded within everyday school operations, questions of ownership, agency and control become increasingly significant. The following section considers how this transformation is connected to the growing strategic value of educational data within digital economies.

3.6 Surveillance capitalism and the datafication of teaching

The rapid expansion of digital platforms following the pandemic has intensified the role of data within school governance. Digital systems are no longer peripheral administrative tools but central infrastructures through which organisational processes are coordinated and monitored. Within this environment, data functions simultaneously as an instrument of management and as a valuable resource within digital economies. The increased reliance on management information systems and educational platforms has therefore placed data at the centre of contemporary schooling.

Rowe (2019) situates these developments within a broader transformation associated with surveillance capitalism, in which the extraction and processing of behavioural data becomes a dominant organising principle across many sectors. In educational contexts this transformation is visible in the proliferation of school management systems that record attendance, monitor engagement and document behaviour and attainment. Such platforms generate detailed data profiles of both students and teachers, offering administrators new forms of visibility and coordination. These systems are frequently presented as improving efficiency and responsiveness, yet they also introduce new forms of monitoring and control. As Cavanagh (2017) notes, the expansion of digital infrastructures has created a competitive environment in which technology companies seek to establish their platforms as indispensable components of school administration.

The growing presence of large technology firms illustrates the tensions surrounding this development. Companies such as Google provide widely used digital tools that are often promoted as accessible and cost-effective solutions for schools. At the same time, concerns have been raised about the collection, storage and potential commercial use of educational data generated through these systems. Singer (2017b) argues that such arrangements may weaken institutional authority and reduce the scope for professional judgment. Regulatory frameworks have struggled to keep pace with these technological developments. Even prior to the pandemic, Singer (2015) highlighted the absence of clear legal guidance concerning the responsibilities of EdTech providers in relation to data ownership, privacy and accountability. As digital infrastructures expand further into school systems, these regulatory questions become increasingly significant.

International organisations have also raised concerns about the implications of data-intensive educational technologies. UNESCO (2021:88) warns that advances in machine learning and algorithmic decision-making risk fragmenting educational processes into discrete data points, thereby reinforcing managerial logics of measurement and evaluation. Digital systems frequently prescribe how teachers record and track information. UNESCO (2023:176) observes that such systems can exercise considerable influence over everyday working practices, with platform workflows often determining how tasks are completed.

Evidence from teacher organisations suggests that these developments are frequently introduced with limited professional consultation. A survey conducted by Education International during the pandemic reported that many teachers felt excluded from decisions about the adoption of digital technologies within their schools (Colclough, 2020). The implementation of EdTech systems without meaningful participation from teaching staff may therefore embed new power asymmetries within school governance. Hansen and Komljenovic (2022:1) similarly note that automated interventions in education are expanding rapidly, often without sustained scrutiny of the technological and commercial infrastructures involved.

Concerns about data governance have also been raised by civil society organisations. A Human Rights Watch investigation (2022) found that data generated through digital learning platforms during the pandemic was frequently transmitted directly to technology companies, often without clear transparency or informed consent from users. In many cases teachers were unable to access or interpret the data generated through these systems for pedagogical purposes. Instead, information flowed into private-sector infrastructures whose operational logics remained opaque.

These developments reflect a broader logic in which educational data becomes a strategic resource. Jose Ferreira, former chief executive of the educational technology company Knewton, articulated this perspective directly in 2012 when he suggested that education represents ‘the world’s most data mineable industry’ (Ferreira, cited in Lohr, 2012). Such statements illustrate how data extraction is positioned as a central driver of technological innovation within the EdTech sector.

The implications extend beyond questions of privacy. When educational data circulates without meaningful professional or democratic oversight, it risks becoming a mechanism of organisational control rather than a resource for pedagogical development. Quantitative indicators that promise improved accountability may simultaneously shape behaviour and narrow the scope for professional discretion. The growing reliance on metrics therefore contributes to a transformation in how teaching work is understood and evaluated.

The following section develops the theoretical framework required to interpret these developments. In particular, it introduces selected concepts from Foucauldian governmentality to examine how digital platforms reorganise relations of power within schools and shape the conduct of teachers and managers in data-driven environments.

3.7 Platform surveillance and the restructuring of teacher–manager relations

The spread of digital platforms across English schools has introduced a new organisational infrastructure for managerial oversight, closely bound to practices of visibility and evaluation.

Earlier forms of industrial management relied on more direct modes of supervision. Factory discipline was maintained through the physical organisation of labour and through managerial monitoring of workers' activity. As discussed in Chapter 2, Braverman's analysis of the labour process demonstrates that capitalist control increasingly operates through the design and organisation of work itself, rather than through direct supervision alone. Management becomes a 'perfected and subtle instrument' through which 'the capitalist strives... to control' the labour process (Braverman, 1974:48). In contemporary schooling similar dynamics are mediated through digital infrastructures that organise the recording and interpretation of teachers' work.

As the discussion of surveillance in Chapter 2 demonstrated, the analytical metaphor of the panopticon offers one way of understanding this transformation. Bentham's design for a circular prison placed inmates within cells that were permanently visible from a central watchtower. As prisoners could never know when they were being observed, the possibility of surveillance encouraged the internalisation of discipline. Foucault (1977) extended this idea beyond the prison to show how modern institutions rely on comparable mechanisms of surveillance, normalisation and examination. Schools have long formed part of this disciplinary architecture, yet digital platforms introduce new modalities of visibility that differ from earlier bureaucratic forms of record keeping.

Where much of the literature situates students within this digital panopticon (UNESCO, 2023), this thesis shifts attention towards teachers themselves. Platform systems routinely capture information about lesson planning, assessment entries, behaviour logs, homework records and patterns of communication with pupils or parents. These digital traces accumulate within management information systems and may subsequently inform appraisal discussions, performance reviews or capability procedures. Visibility therefore becomes operationalised within everyday governance. Data generated through routine teaching activity provide a basis upon which judgments about what counts as professional standards can be formed. In Foucauldian terms, these infrastructures enable disciplinary power to operate through observation and comparison rather than through direct managerial intervention (Foucault, 1977).

The implications for teacher autonomy are significant. Many digital systems entered schools during the pandemic as pragmatic solutions to the demands of remote teaching. Over time they have become embedded within routine administrative processes. Teachers now work within environments characterised by continuous data capture, where aspects of professional practice are translated into digital records and performance indicators. Monitoring becomes routine, often automated and increasingly detached from the immediate context of teaching. Rather than replacing earlier accountability structures, platform infrastructures extend them by multiplying the points at which teachers' activity can be recorded and interpreted.

Yet the governance role of these systems is rarely presented explicitly. Platforms are typically introduced as tools for coordination: homework tracking and assessment dashboards promise efficiency and improved organisation, while communication functions extend organisational reach. Yet the same infrastructures enable detailed monitoring of staff activity and provide leadership teams with new forms of informational leverage. The boundary between pedagogical support and managerial oversight therefore becomes difficult to disentangle. Systems designed to streamline communication simultaneously generate data that can be mobilised within performance management regimes. In Foucauldian terms, discourse itself becomes a site of struggle: a form of power that, as Foucault (1984a:110) argues, ‘is to be seized’.

These developments point to a gradual reconfiguration of teacher–manager relations. Platform infrastructures alter the informational environment through which authority is exercised, expanding the scope for observation while rendering teachers’ conduct increasingly legible within digital systems. As schools become dependent on these platforms for the coordination of everyday processes, governance is reshaped through a new regime of visibility. Authority is no longer exercised solely through direct supervision or periodic inspection but through the ongoing circulation of platform data that informs managerial judgment.

3.8 Governmentality, calculative practices and platform governance

Within research on digital governance, governmentality provides a useful way of analysing how power operates through everyday organisational practices rather than through direct hierarchical control (Barnett et al., 2010). It draws attention to the dispersed and relational character of governance, emphasising how power operates through institutions, practices and forms of knowledge. Power can be understood as ‘diffused throughout all social relations rather than being imposed from above’ (Mills, 2003:47).

Governmentality provides a useful lens for interpreting how digital platforms participate in the organisation of conduct within contemporary schools. Rather than operating primarily through direct supervision, governance increasingly takes place through routine practices of visibility, comparison and evaluation embedded in digital systems. Platform infrastructures translate everyday professional activity into records, indicators and performance traces that can be mobilised within organisational decision-making. In this way, governance operates through the structuring of informational environments rather than through overt intervention alone.

Foucault emphasised that power relations are not confined to central authorities but emerge through everyday organisational practices. As he notes, power relations ‘are multiple; they have different forms, they can be in play in family relations, or within an institution, or an administration’ (Foucault, 1988a:38). Governance therefore occurs through arrangements that

make conduct visible and open to evaluation. Administrative procedures and reporting mechanisms contained within information systems all contribute to the regulation of behaviour by structuring how activity is recorded and then assessed (Taylor, 2014).

These insights are particularly relevant for contemporary schooling. Reforms associated with academisation, the expansion of educational technologies and the increasing prominence of data-driven accountability have altered the organisational environment of English schools. Digital platforms now mediate many of the processes through which teaching activity is monitored and evaluated. In doing so they create new conditions in which teachers' conduct becomes subject to managerial interpretation.

Within the literature on governmentality, calculative practices represent one mechanism through which governance is enacted. Hayes et al. (2018:1205) describe calculative practices as procedures that translate complex activities into measurable indicators, enabling comparison and evaluation across organisational settings. Although their analysis focuses on development organisations, the underlying logic applies equally to educational institutions. Performance indicators and reporting requirements can redistribute authority by privileging those who design and interpret the metrics while constraining those whose work is evaluated through them.

In schools, these calculative practices are increasingly embedded within digital infrastructures. Platforms that record attendance, behaviour and assessment outcomes transform aspects of teaching into structured data points. As Gorur and Dey (2021:79) note, such processes can 'reconfigure relations and redistribute agency and responsibility', reshaping how authority is exercised within institutions.

As argued in Chapter 2, governmentality directs attention to the formation of subjectivities as a key mechanism of power. Teachers may come to orient their conduct in relation to the indicators and expectations embedded within digital platforms, adjusting their behaviour in anticipation of evaluation. Through these processes professional identities can become intertwined with the maintenance of measurable indicators and visible evidence of performance.

These insights suggest that digital platforms function as more than administrative technologies. They participate in the organisation of governance by structuring how teachers' activity is interpreted. Platform infrastructures therefore contribute to the emergence of calculative practices, disciplinary forms of visibility and processes of subject formation within contemporary schooling.

These themes are developed further in Chapter 4, where governmentality is integrated with the critical realist framework that underpins the study. In that chapter, governmentality is used selectively as a conceptual resource for interpreting how calculative practices, disciplinary

techniques and subject formation interact with the structural and normative mechanisms identified through the morphogenetic analysis.

3.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has examined how digital platformisation has become embedded within the contemporary organisation of schooling. Building on the historical account developed in Chapter 2, it has shown how the expansion of the EdTech sector and the growing reliance on digital infrastructures have altered the governance environment of English secondary schools. Platform systems increasingly structure how teachers' work is recorded and interpreted within schools, creating new conditions under which teachers' activity becomes visible and open to evaluation.

Within this setting, governmentality offers a limited but useful analytical perspective. Rather than explaining governance through direct authority alone, it highlights how conduct is shaped through routine organisational practices. In the context of digital schooling, these processes are closely connected to the emergence of calculative practices that translate aspects of teaching into measurable indicators, disciplinary techniques that normalise particular expectations of conduct, and processes of subject formation through which teachers come to orient their conduct in relation to these evaluative systems.

In this thesis, Foucauldian insights are employed selectively. They show how platform infrastructures organise visibility and evaluation within everyday school practice, but they do not provide a full explanation of the conditions under which such arrangements emerge. Governmentality is therefore used here as an interpretive lens for examining how governance operates within schools rather than as a comprehensive theoretical foundation.

These limitations indicate the need for a framework capable of explaining how such arrangements emerge within particular organisational settings. The following chapter therefore develops the critical realist foundations of the study and clarifies how governmentality is incorporated as a supplementary analytic for interpreting calculative practices, disciplinary techniques and processes of subject formation within platform-mediated school environments.

Table 3.1 provides a comparable consolidation of the chapter's themes to that offered in Chapter 2. Together, the two tables establish the ways in which this thesis addresses gaps in the existing literature.

Literature review synthesis			
Topic	What the literature establishes	Gaps and limitations	How this thesis addresses them
Commercialisation and platformisation of EdTech	- The pandemic dramatically accelerated the financial and infrastructural entrenchment of EdTech firms, producing a winner-takes-most market dominated by a small number of providers. - Processes of marketisation, privatisation and commercialisation have reshaped the governance landscape of English schooling, enabling private actors to embed themselves within core educational infrastructures. - Soft privatisation (Cone and Brøgger, 2020) describes how commercial logics enter schools through digital systems rather than formal asset transfer, often with limited democratic scrutiny.	- The political economy of EdTech is extensively theorised at the macro level; how commercial and platform logics are enacted within individual schools, and how these interact with local governance cultures, remains empirically underexplored. - The relationship between market concentration at the sector level and the everyday governance of teachers within schools is rarely traced analytically.	The case studies examine how commercially developed platforms become embedded within organisational routines, attending to how platform design, procurement decisions and leadership priorities interact in shaping the governance of teachers' work.
Datafication and surveillance of teaching	- Digital platforms function as infrastructures for the continuous capture and processing of data about teachers' professional activity, making conduct open to managerial interpretation. - Educational data is increasingly treated as a strategic resource within digital economies, raising wider concerns about the commercial use of information generated in schools. - Teacher organisations report that platform adoption frequently occurs without meaningful professional consultation, embedding power asymmetries within new governance arrangements.	- Much of the surveillance literature focuses on students as subjects of digital monitoring; teachers as objects of platform-based oversight receive comparatively limited attention. - Empirical research into how teachers experience and respond to datafication within English secondary schools is sparse; accounts tend to be either abstract-theoretical or based on survey data that cannot capture situated practices.	This study places teachers, rather than students, at the centre of the analysis of digital surveillance, generating qualitative empirical data on how platform monitoring is experienced, interpreted and negotiated in two contrasting school settings.
Platform governance and teacher–manager relations	Digital platforms extend and intensify earlier forms of managerial oversight by multiplying the points at which teachers' activity can be recorded and interpreted.	Accounts of platform governance in education rarely examine variation across institutional contexts; the literature tends to treat platformisation as a uniform process with consistent effects.	This thesis develops a mechanism-based account using critical realism, integrates Bhaskar's stratified ontology, Archer's morphogenetic approach

	• Governance increasingly operates not through direct supervision but through the circulation of platform data that informs managerial judgment, reconfiguring the informational basis of authority.	• The mechanisms through which platform governance becomes consolidated or contested, and the role of leadership culture, normative formations and spatio-material conditions in shaping these processes, are not theorised in existing literature.	and Elder-Vass's norm circles to explain why comparable digital systems produce different governance outcomes across the two case schools.
Governmentality, calculative practices and platform governance	• Governmentality (Foucault) provides a useful interpretive lens for analysing how governance operates through everyday practices of visibility and comparison rather than through direct hierarchical command. • Calculative practices, including performance indicators, dashboards and reporting requirements, redistribute authority by privileging those who design and interpret metrics while constraining those whose work is evaluated through them. • Digital platforms encourage processes of subjectivation (Foucault, 1982) through which teachers orient their conduct in relation to evaluative expectations embedded in data systems.	• Governmentality frameworks are not well equipped to explain why governance takes different forms across organisational contexts, or how structural and normative conditions shape the enactment of platform power; they tend to describe rather than explain variation. • The relationship between governmentality as a meso-level social mechanism through which norms are reproduced within organisations has received little sustained theoretical attention in educational governance literature.	The thesis incorporates governmentality selectively as a supplementary interpretive lens on soft and relational power, situated within a critical realist framework that provides the explanatory depth needed to account for contextual variation. Norm circles are introduced as the meso-level mechanism linking structural conditions to situated practice.

Table 3.1: Literature review synthesis – Chapter 3

4 Theoretical framework – morphogenesis, norm circles and governmentality

4.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters located platform governance in English secondary schooling within longer-run changes associated with neoliberal reform, New Public Management and data-driven accountability (Ball, 2003, Hood, 1991, Ozga, 2009). Having set out this context and reviewed the relevant literature, this chapter shifts from description to explanation. It develops the theoretical architecture through which this thesis interprets the ways digital platforms shape teacher–manager power relations, professional identity and patterns of compliance, negotiation and resistance across the two contrasting governance settings.

The critical realism anchoring provides the ontological depth for examining how observable experiences arise from underlying structures, cultural logics and causal mechanisms operating in open systems (2005[1979], 2008a[1975]). On this basis, Archer's (1995, 2003) morphogenetic approach is introduced in order to preserve the analytical distinction between structure, culture and agency while tracing their interplay over time. Particular attention is given to reflexivity as the mediating process through which teachers deliberate upon, accommodate or contest the conditions they confront (Archer, 1995, 2007). Elder-Vass's (2010, 2012) concept of norm circles then extends the account of cultural power by clarifying how norms acquire causal force through collective endorsement and sanction. This helps explain why platform demands become taken for granted in some settings yet remain more open to negotiation in others.

This chapter then brings these realist resources into dialogue with the selected Foucauldian concepts drawn from governmentality (Foucault, 2007, 2008). As previously indicated, governmentality is used here in a limited and supplementary sense to better explain the micro-dynamics of platform power, specifically calculative practices, disciplinary techniques and processes of subjectivation associated with routine data use (Foucault, 1977). The purpose is not to replace realist explanation with a form of discourse analysis, but to strengthen the account of how power operates through both structural conditioning and everyday self-regulation.

The chapter concludes by drawing these elements together into a single layered framework. That framework informs the methodological design set out in Chapter 5 and guides the interpretation of the empirical material that follows.

4.2 Critical realism as a theoretical lens for educational research

‘Social scientists should be both realists and social constructionists’ (Elder-Vass, 2012:3).

Founded on the work of Roy Bhaskar (1989, 1998a, 2005[1979], 2008a[1975]), critical realism (CR) is an ontological and philosophical framework that seeks to move beyond the long-standing division between positivism and interpretivism. It rejects both empiricist reductionism and strong social constructionism. Whilst acknowledging that knowledge is socially produced, historically situated and fallible, CR maintains that reality exists independently of human perception or discourse (Bhaskar, 2008a[1975]; Banfield, 2022). This combination of epistemological relativism and ontological realism preserves the possibility of producing plausible, evidence-informed explanations of the structures and mechanisms that generate observable social phenomena.

At the centre of CR are several closely related commitments: a stratified ontology, a non-Humean view of causation and an emergent account of social reality. These support an explanatory orientation that avoids both determinism and relativism. Elder-Vass (2012) distinguishes between radical constructionism, which collapses reality into discourse, and moderate constructionism, which accepts that descriptions of the world are socially constructed whilst still referring to an independent reality. This thesis aligns with this more moderate position. As Sayer (2000:41) observes, ‘not all social practices and relations are textual or text-like, and most have a material aspect which is usually of some importance, such as the body, resources, physical environment, and mobility.’ In this study, digital platforms, institutional rules and organisational hierarchies are therefore treated as real objects, and relations, with causal powers rather than merely as representations or narratives.

Bhaskar’s metaphor of a stratified ontology distinguishes between the real, the actual and the empirical (Bhaskar, 2008a[1975]). The real refers to underlying structures and causal mechanisms; the actual to events that occur whether observed or not; and the empirical to events as they are experienced or observed. This depth ontology (Fig. 4.1) allows the analysis to move beyond surface description towards the generative conditions that shape observable practices and experiences. For research on digital governance in schools, this is especially important because some of the most consequential influences, such as data accountability regimes and latent forms of control, are only partly visible within everyday interaction.

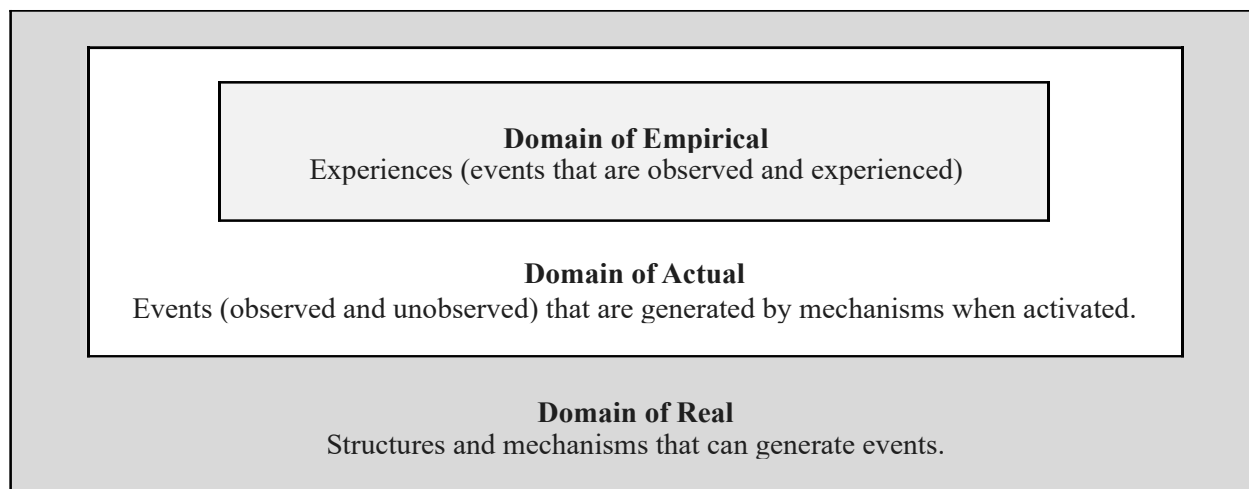


Figure 4.1: Adapted from Bhaskar's (2008a[1975]) stratified ontology.

CR thus provides both an ontological grounding and an explanatory framework for analysing the reconfiguration of relations between teachers, managers and digital systems. Its commitment to emergence, whereby higher-order social forms arise from but are not reducible to lower-level interactions, enables digital governance to be conceptualised as generative of new institutional logics and associated normative expectations, as well as shifts in professional identity. A platform-based data regime, for instance, may give rise to a 'data-driven culture' or reconstitute teacher identity in forms such as teacher-as-data-producer or teacher-as-data-subject. Such developments exceed explanation in terms of individual intention alone and cannot be fully reduced to discursive construction, given the causal role of material arrangements and institutional conditions. These commitments inform the subsequent use of Archer's morphogenetic approach and Elder-Vass's norm circles, which together provide an account of how emergent social forms are elaborated, stabilised and come to exercise causal efficacy over time.

Before introducing those frameworks, several foundational assumptions from Bhaskar's original phase of CR need clarifying.¹⁰ Bhaskar's early transcendental work addressed a basic philosophical question: 'What must the world – beyond our ideas of it – be like in order that science can produce reliable knowledge?' (Pocock, 2015:168). His answer was a meta-theoretical position that combines a realist ontology, the claim that 'there is a real world that is not only ideational, but also exists independently of conceptualisation and interpretation' (Fletcher, 2024:159), with an

¹⁰ This thesis adopts *original critical realism* (OCR) as articulated in Bhaskar's *A Realist Theory of Science* (2008a[1975]) and *The Possibility of Naturalism* (2005[1979]). It does not extend to *dialectical critical realism* (Bhaskar, 2008b) or *metaReality* (Bhaskar, 2012 [2002]). The concern here is with the explanatory utility of OCR's depth ontology and its account of causal powers for analysing platform governance and teacher agency.

acknowledgement that all knowledge is theory-laden and historically situated (Sayer, 2000).¹¹ CR was developed partly in response to the limitations of positivism, Popperian falsificationism and post-positivist philosophy of science (Thiery, 2004).¹²

The term critical realism reflects the joining of two strands within Bhaskar's philosophy: transcendental realism (TR), concerned with the conditions of possibility for scientific knowledge, and critical naturalism (CN), concerned with the distinctive character of social scientific explanation (Bhaskar, 2008b:1). Together, these strands support an explanatory critique that bridges natural and social inquiry. As Zachariadis, Scott and Barrett (2010:3–4) note, this makes CR particularly well suited to areas such as information systems and educational technology, where material artefacts and social processes are closely intertwined.

CR does not prescribe a single method; it offers an ontological orientation and an 'analytical toolkit' (Sayer, 2000) through which methodological choices are guided by the nature of the object under investigation. The focus of the research in this thesis is socio-technical, combining software, data and school routines with teacher norms, identities and practices. CR's distinction between intransitive objects, structures and mechanisms that exist independently of our knowledge, and transitive knowledge, the theories and concepts through which we seek to understand them, allows the analysis to examine how macro- and meso-level arrangements shape school-level practice even when actors are only partially aware of these influences.¹³ Within this framework, selected Foucauldian concepts are later used to illuminate how calculative practices, disciplinary techniques and processes of subject formation associated with digital data systems influence expectations of professional conduct. In this way, CR supports a both-and orientation: it affirms the existence of causally efficacious structures whilst also recognising that meanings, knowledge and subjectivities are socially produced and historically situated.

The key ontological principles of original critical realism informing this study can be summarised as follows:

- **Intransitive reality** – A reality exists independently of our descriptions of it. Social and material structures have properties and effects whether or not they are recognised (Bhaskar, 2008a[1975];

¹¹ This position is compatible with Elder-Vass's (2012) formulation of *realist social constructionism*, which argues that social scientists should be both realists and social constructionists. For Elder-Vass, constructionism need not entail ontological idealism; rather, it can be grounded in a realist ontology that acknowledges the causal efficacy of social structures whilst recognising that many social phenomena are dependently constructed through human practices and discourse (*The Reality of Social Construction*, p. 3).

¹² Thiery's (2004) *Critique of Popper's falsification theory: A phenomenological approach* is a doctoral dissertation submitted to Assumption University, Thailand. Although not a peer-reviewed publication, it illustrates the persistence of philosophical challenges to falsificationism beyond mainstream accounts.

¹³ The intransitive and transitive are roughly and basically a distinction between epistemology and ontology. As ontology contains epistemology, the transitive dimension of knowledge is therefore contained within, but does not exhaust, the intransitive domain of being. (Bhaskar, 2008a[1975]; 2005[1979]).

Joseph, 2004:144). Digital platforms and institutional rules are therefore treated as real objects with causal influence, not merely as texts or discourses.

- **Stratification** – Reality is layered into domains and levels. Bhaskar (2008a[1975]) distinguishes between the real, actual and empirical, whilst social reality itself comprises multiple strata, for example psychological, organisational and economic. This allows analysis of how national policy conditions organisational arrangements, which in turn shape individual experience, without collapsing one level into another.

- **Open systems** – Social life unfolds in open systems in which multiple mechanisms interact, so that causes do not generate uniform effects. Critical realism therefore focuses on tendencies, understood as causal powers ‘in motion’ (Bhaskar and Hartwig, 2010:70); as Bhaskar observes, ‘[i]n the concept of tendency, the concept of power is thus literally dynamized or set in motion’ (Bhaskar, 2008a[1975]:40). The tendency of CO₂ to cause global warming is at work even when global temperatures drop: the absence of consistent effects indicates not the absence of causal power but its mediation within specific contexts. This point, together with the transfactual character of tendencies, is developed in Section 4.3.

- **Emergence** – Higher-level entities such as institutions, organisations and norm circles possess causal powers irreducible to those of individuals, even though they depend on human relations for their existence (Archer, 1995; Elder-Vass, 2010). Emergence underpins a non-reductionist account of digital governance in which cultures of surveillance or compliance arise through interaction yet confront actors as relatively objective conditions.

From these assumptions follows a causal-powers view of explanation. Structures and objects possess capacities by virtue of what they are. A digital platform, for example, has the capacity to render work activity visible, store traces of work activity and enable comparison between workers. Whether and how these powers are activated depends on context. Explanation therefore involves identifying which mechanisms are operative and under what conditions, rather than establishing law-like regularities. This directs the study away from correlational claims and towards retroductive questions about what must be operating for particular patterns of platform governance and professional response to occur.

CR’s attention to both materiality and sociality make it especially appropriate for analysing digital platform governance. Platforms are simultaneously technical artefacts and social systems. CR avoids both ontological flattening and discursive reduction by treating platforms as real objects with causal powers whilst also examining the discourses through which they are understood and legitimised. This realist foundation provides the basis for the next sections, which introduce Archer’s morphogenetic approach, Elder-Vass’s norm circles and selected elements of

governmentality as a complementary approach to analyse temporality, normativity and micro-power.¹⁴

4.3 Bhaskar's ontology: stratification, causal powers and four pillars of critical realism

Before turning to the structure–agency dynamics developed in Archer's morphogenetic approach, it is necessary to consolidate the ontological commitments of Bhaskar's original formulation of critical realism, introduced earlier in Section 4.2, as these provide the explanatory foundations for the analysis of platform governance developed in this chapter (Bhaskar, 2008a[1975]; 2005[1979]). These commitments are brought together here as four interrelated pillars.

1. Reality's intransitivity. Critical realism begins from the claim that reality is mind-independent. Social structures, although socially produced, are not reducible to individual perceptions or interpretations. Once established, they possess a degree of autonomy and exert causal influence whether or not actors explicitly recognise them (Bhaskar, 2005[1979]; Sayer, 2000). Digital platforms and school policies are therefore treated as real arrangements with causal effects, even though knowledge of them is always mediated, partial and theory-laden. By distinguishing ontology (what exists) from epistemology (how we know), CR avoids collapsing social reality into discourse and resists strong relativist positions.

2. Ontological stratification. Reality is differentiated into distinct but related domains. Bhaskar (2008a[1975]) distinguishes the real (structures, mechanisms and causal powers), the actual (events that occur whether observed or not) and the empirical (events as experienced or observed). Empirical observations are therefore understood as the surface expression of deeper generative conditions. A reported change in teacher behaviour, for example, may reflect mechanisms located in normative expectations or technological development. CR also recognises multiple layers of social reality – psychological, organisational and institutional – each characterised by emergent properties. A teacher's actions cannot be explained at a single level; they are shaped simultaneously by their personal concerns, in conjunction with the school's institutional arrangements and material infrastructures.

3. Open systems and contingency. Social phenomena unfold in open systems in which multiple mechanisms intersect. Causal powers operate as tendencies rather than producing regular, law-like sequences of events (Bhaskar, 2005[1979]). The same mechanism may therefore generate different outcomes in different contexts. This insight underpins CR's use of retrodution, which moves from observed patterns to questions about what must be operating for those patterns to occur under

¹⁴ This outline is not intended as an exhaustive account of each framework but rather reflects how their key principles have been selectively combined and adapted to serve the explanatory aims of this study.

particular conditions. Platform adoption, for instance, does not uniformly diminish or enhance teacher autonomy. Variation is expected and becomes an object of explanation rather than an anomaly. This pillar also entails transfactuality: a mechanism may exist and remain active even when its effects are not directly observable because countervailing mechanisms suppress or offset its expression.

4. Emergence and the causal efficacy of structure. Higher-level social entities such as institutions, organisations and normative formations arise from relations between individuals yet possess causal powers irreducible to those individuals (Bhaskar, 2005[1979]; Archer, 1995). Social structures depend upon human activity for their existence but confront actors as relatively objective conditions that enable and constrain action. This emergentist position avoids both methodological individualism and structural determinism. Elder-Vass's (2010) concept of norm circles develops this insight further by showing how networks of mutual endorsement and sanction allow norms to acquire causal force. Emergence therefore provides the ontological basis for treating phenomena, such as a school's culture and practices, as real and causally efficacious.

Considered together, these pillars provide the ontological depth and causal vocabulary required to conceptualise digital platform governance as the outcome of interacting technical, structural and cultural mechanisms. They establish the conditions for explanatory analysis by directing attention beyond actors' accounts towards the generative mechanisms shaping practice. On this basis, and before turning to Archer's morphogenetic approach, the following section situates this perspective within the wider structure–agency debate in social theory. Thus, clarifying the questions it addresses and the alternative ideological positions against which it is best understood.

4.4 The structure–agency debate in social theory

The relationship between structure and agency is one of the most enduring debates in social theory. At its centre is the question of how to reconcile the causal significance of social structures, including institutions, rules, distributions of resources and inherited cultural meanings, with the capacity of actors to interpret, resist and transform the conditions in which they act (Giddens, 1984; Archer, 1995). The issue centres on whether social outcomes are best explained primarily through the properties of structures, which appear to shape conduct independently of individuals, or through the actions of knowledgeable agents, whose practices reproduce and transform the social world. This debate is significant for this thesis because explaining variations in teacher responses to platform governance requires accounting for both the conditions within which they work and their capacity to act within them.

Neither perspective, however, is sufficient in itself. Approaches that privilege structure risk treating social forces as determining conditions that leave little room for human agency.

Approaches that privilege agency risk reducing social order to the consequences of individual action and struggle to explain why institutions, practices and cultural patterns persist beyond particular actors. The challenge for social theory has therefore been to explain how structures exercise causal influence without eliminating agency, while recognising that agency always operates within conditions that actors themselves did not create.

Archer (1995) provides a useful framework for organising the key responses to this problem. She identifies three forms of conflation, each representing a failure to maintain an analytical distinction between structure and agency. Upward conflation, associated with methodological individualism, reduces structure to the accumulated outcome of individual action. Downward conflation, associated with stronger forms of structuralism and normative functionalism, reverses this relationship by treating agents as largely determined by structural and cultural systems. The third position, central conflation, seeks to overcome this opposition by treating structure and agency as mutually constitutive. Archer associates this approach most closely with Giddens's theory of structuration (Archer, 1995; 2010). However, she argues that central conflation creates a problem of its own: by collapsing structure and agency into a single process, it becomes difficult to explain how existing conditions shape action and how action subsequently transforms those conditions over time.¹⁵

Giddens's structuration theory represents the most prominent attempt to overcome the structure–agency divide. Rather than treating structure and agency as a dualism, he conceptualises them as a duality (Giddens, 1979; 1984). Structure consists of rules and resources that exist through actors' knowledge and their enactment in everyday practices rather than as an external order removed from social activity. It is therefore both the 'medium' through which action occurs and the 'outcome' of that action: actors draw upon 'rules and resources' in acting, thereby reproducing them (Giddens, 1984:25). Agency rests on the capacity to have acted otherwise, with actors possessing reflexive awareness of their circumstances and the consequences of their conduct.

The strength of this approach lies in rejecting the idea that structure and agency are separate forces competing for explanatory priority. Instead, it emphasises how social life is continually reproduced through routine practices. For the study of schools as organisations, this focus is valuable because it foregrounds the everyday practices through which institutional arrangements are sustained. From the realist perspective adopted in this thesis, however, the question is whether structuration theory provides sufficient analytical separation to explain *why* similar organisational settings can produce different trajectories of platform governance.

¹⁵ Robert Archer (2002) supports Margaret Archer's (1995; 2010) view that educational change is best understood through the morphogenetic approach, by analytically distinguishing the structural and cultural conditions of teachers' work from their subsequent responses to those conditions.

Archer's (1995; 2010) objection is not that Giddens is wrong to emphasise the interdependence of structure and agency, but that treating them as inseparable weakens explanation. If structures exist only through their enactment in action, it becomes difficult to account for their temporal priority and relative independence. Teachers encounter social conditions that pre-exist their own activity, and those conditions may enable or constrain what they are able to do. Without distinguishing between these prior conditions and the actions that respond to them, it is less clear why similar structural circumstances produce different outcomes. For a thesis concerned with why comparable digital platforms become embedded differently across schools, this distinction is analytically important.

A second influential attempt to move beyond the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism is found in Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977; 1990). Bourdieu challenges structuralist approaches that overstate the determining force of social structures and phenomenological approaches that emphasise conscious individual choice. Instead, he locates the basis of action in the habitus: a system of durable and transposable dispositions acquired through socialisation that shapes perception, judgment and practice without requiring conscious calculation.

The habitus is described as a set of 'structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures' (Bourdieu, 1990:53). It is both produced by objective social conditions and generative of regular patterns of action. Practice emerges through the relationship between habitus and field, the structured social spaces within which actors occupy positions, and is shaped by the forms of capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) that actors possess (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The significance of this approach lies in demonstrating how social structures become embodied within individuals and reproduced through ordinary practice, often without conscious awareness.

From the realist perspective adopted in this thesis, however, practice theory raises similar difficulties concerning the blurring of structure and agency to those outlined above. Archer argues that the habitus risks explaining reproduction more effectively than transformation because dispositions formed through existing conditions primarily reproduce those conditions (Archer, 2007; 2012). Although Bourdieu recognises reflexivity more broadly, his primary concern is participant objectivation, as the reflexive examination of the researcher's own relation to the object of inquiry. He argues that 'the sociology of sociology is a necessity, not a luxury' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:254) and that 'objectivation of the relation of the sociologist to his or her object is...the necessary condition' (ibid:259) for scientific knowledge. Consequently, his account gives considerably less emphasis to the conscious reflexive deliberation of ordinary social actors than Giddens (1979; 1984) or Archer (1995; 2007).

For Archer, this distinction becomes especially important under conditions of rapid social change. When actors encounter unfamiliar circumstances for which existing dispositions provide

insufficient guidance, they must engage in conscious internal deliberation rather than simply reproduce established patterns of practice (Archer, 2003; 2007; 2012). This thesis is concerned precisely with such situations: how teachers interpret and respond to unfamiliar forms of platform governance rather than simply reproduce already established routines.

Archer's analytical dualism provides an alternative approach to both structuration and practice theory. She argues that structure, culture and agency are interdependent in practice but possess distinct properties and causal powers. They can therefore be separated analytically in order to examine their relationship over time (Archer, 1995). The basis of this separation is temporal. Structural and cultural conditions pre-exist the actions through which they are reproduced or transformed, while any subsequent restructuring emerges only after those actions have occurred. Teachers at the respective schools therefore encounter conditions they did not create, while their responses contribute to shaping the conditions encountered by subsequent teachers.

This temporal (re)ordering allows structure, culture and agency to be distinguished without treating them as independent or unrelated entities. It also retains the (critical) realist claim that structures possess causal influence while maintaining a substantial role for reflexive agency. Analytical dualism therefore avoids both the determinism associated with downward conflation and the explanatory difficulties associated with central conflation.

Analytical dualism is not, however, without criticism. This thesis adopts it as a qualified framework rather than an unquestioned solution to the structure–agency problem. King (1999; 2010) argues that morphogenetic theory reintroduces an untenable dualism by treating structures as analytically separable from the individuals whose actions constitute them. Other critics question whether Archer's temporal separation of structure and agency can be sustained empirically, arguing that social life is more intertwined than analytical dualism suggests (Fleetwood, 2008; Elder-Vass, 2010). It has also been argued that, compared with Bourdieu and Giddens, Archer gives less attention to the routine and habitual dimensions of practice through which social life is reproduced. Consequently, morphogenetic theory should be regarded as one explanatory framework rather than a definitive resolution of the structure–agency debate.

These debates remain unresolved and this thesis makes no claim that morphogenetic theory resolves the structure–agency problem. Archer's framework is adopted because it provides the analytical resources required for the explanatory aims of this study. First, analytical dualism is consistent with the stratified and emergentist ontology of critical realism established above. Second, its temporal framework enables analysis of how platform governance develops and changes as digital platforms become embedded within school contexts. Third, its distinction between structural conditions, culture and reflexive agency provides a basis for explaining why comparable platform technologies became associated with different organisational trajectories across two contrasting school designations.

Archer's morphogenetic approach, which follows, is therefore employed on a qualified basis, recognising that no position within the structure–agency debate is uncontested. For this thesis, however, it offers the most appropriate framework because it enables comparison of contrasting structural relations across the two schools, examination of organisational change over time as platforms enter school contexts, and analysis of how teachers and school leaders exercise reflexive agency within those contexts to reproduce or transform existing governance arrangements.

4.5 Archer's morphogenetic approach: structure, agency and time

Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach (1995; 1996; 2012) provides a temporally sensitive framework for analysing the interplay of structure, culture and agency. Bhaskar's ontological framing set the benchmark for realist social theory, but it offered a comparatively underdeveloped account of how structural and cultural powers are mediated through agency over time in concrete social processes (Bhaskar, 2005[1979]). Archer's approach can be understood as a development of this position, elaborating the mechanisms through which such powers are activated, contested and reproduced (Archer, 1995:3–4).¹⁶

Central to Archer's position is analytical dualism: for explanatory purposes, structure and culture are treated as analytically distinct from agency, even though they are always interconnected. Structures (such as roles, resource distributions and institutional rules) and cultural systems (including normative frameworks and dominant ideas) pre-date particular actions, yet their causal influence is realised only through the mediation of human agents. This preserves 'analytical separation' without collapsing agents into structures or reducing structures to aggregates of individual action (Archer, 1995:15–18).

The morphogenetic model conceptualises social change through a recurring temporal sequence: $T_1 \rightarrow T_2 - T_3 \rightarrow T_4$.

- **T₁ (Time 1): structural and cultural conditioning.** At the outset of an analytical period, actors encounter pre-existing structural and cultural conditions. These include organisational hierarchies, prevailing policies, technologies and the norms that frame them. Such conditions generate situational logics – patterned opportunities, constraints and pressures that shape, but do not determine, courses of action. In a school setting, for example, established performance

¹⁶ Archer's morphogenetic approach is developed within the ontological framework of Bhaskar's Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA), which conceptualises social structures as both the condition and outcome of human action (Bhaskar, 2005[1979]). Archer extends this position by introducing analytical dualism and temporal sequencing in order to examine empirically how structural and cultural powers are mediated through agency over time (Archer, 1995: 65–68).

management policies combined with platform-based data infrastructures may generate a *situational logic* oriented towards the monitoring and measurement of outcomes.

- **T₂–T₃: social interaction and agential mediation.** Between T₁ and T₄ lies the phase of interaction in which agents interpret and respond to these conditioning contexts in light of their projects and concerns. Archer distinguishes analytically between the onset (T₂) and development (T₃) of interaction, while acknowledging that the boundary between them is fluid. This phase foregrounds heterogeneity of response. Even under similar conditions, actors may comply, accommodate, negotiate or resist in divergent ways. Thus, some teachers may embrace data-driven logics, others may engage in minimal or symbolic compliance, while others may quietly subvert particular requirements. Outcomes are therefore contingent upon what teachers, as agents, actually do.

- **T₄: morphogenesis or morphostasis.** At T₄, interaction results either in the reproduction of existing structural and cultural arrangements (morphostasis) or in their elaboration and transformation (morphogenesis). These outcomes then become the conditioning context for the next cycle. In the context of platform governance, widespread compliance may contribute to the institutionalisation of new norms of transparency and intensified managerial oversight. In contrast, persistent *resistance* or selective non-use may limit or redirect platform integration. Change is rarely uniform, and morphogenetic and morphostatic tendencies often coexist.

The value of this sequencing lies not in claiming the processes within schools occur in neatly distinct stages, but in providing an analytical device for examining how pre-existing structural and cultural conditions shape the actions of school staff, and how these interactions produce patterns of institutional reproduction or change. It supports retroductive questioning by asking which structural and cultural conditions mattered, how teachers responded to them, and what outcomes followed these interactions. As outlined in Section 4.4, Archer's (1995) insistence on the distinct properties and powers of structure, culture and agency challenges conflationary approaches such as structuration theory (Giddens, 1991), for collapsing these elements into a single analytical moment.¹⁷

Two clarifications follow from this position. First, analytical separation is methodological rather than ontological. Structure, culture and agency are distinguished analytically in order to examine how they condition one another over time. Second, temporality is *explanatory* rather than descriptive. The T₁–T₄ sequence clarifies the sequence of processes rather than mapping directly onto chronological time. Together, these commitments allow explanation without resorting either to structural determinism or to voluntaristic accounts of agency.

¹⁷ For detailed explanations of this temporal sequencing and its analytical purpose, see Archer's *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (1995), particularly Chapters 1 and 5, and *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (2000). For a concise summary of her critique of Giddens, see Archer (2000a: 464–472).

Platform infrastructures, alongside the pre-existing school policies and routines that shape teachers' work, are understood as conditioning contexts at T₁. T₂–T₃ captures teachers' and managers' practices and interactions: how data are mobilised, how surveillance is enacted or softened, and the ways platform demands are interpreted and contested. T₄ concerns the emergent outcomes of these interactions, including shifts in professional identity, changes in power relations and the consolidation of new governance routines. Reflexivity, developed in the following section, provides the micro-level mechanism through which agents mediate these influences.

The morphogenetic approach therefore complements Bhaskar's stratified ontology by introducing a process model through which causal powers unfold over time. Where Bhaskar establishes that structures and agents possess distinct causal properties, Archer shows how those properties combine, conflict and evolve in concrete settings. This makes the approach particularly well suited to analysing how the introduction or expansion of digital platforms becomes implicated in longer-term transformations of school governance. It also prepares the ground for examining reflexivity as the mechanism through which structural conditions are translated into agential response.

4.6 Archer on reflexivity: the mediation of structure and agency

A central contribution of Archer's work is her theorisation of reflexivity as the mechanism through which structure and culture are translated into action. Archer locates the distinctive causal power of agency in the internal conversation: the ongoing dialogue through which individuals evaluate their circumstances in relation to their concerns and decide how to act (Archer, 2003; 2007). Structures and cultures possess causal powers in the form of constraints and enablements, yet these powers become effective only when agents interpret and respond to them. Reflexivity therefore connects objective conditions with concrete practices. It helps explain why teachers working under similar institutional arrangements may respond differently to the same platform mandate or accountability demand.

Archer's position rejects both structural determinism and voluntarism. Individuals are born into pre-existing social and cultural arrangements, yet those arrangements do not mechanically determine conduct. Agents reflect on what these conditions mean for them and how they bear upon what they care about. This reflection occurs primarily through internal conversations (Archer, 2007). A requirement to use a particular platform function, for instance, may be interpreted by one teacher as supporting efficiency or workload management, while another may regard it as eroding their professional autonomy and respond through minimal compliance or quiet avoidance. Divergent responses arise not from structural conditions alone but from reflexive mediation.

In Archer's account, constraint and enablement are always relative to agents' concerns. A situation constrains only insofar as it obstructs a project an agent values; it enables only insofar as it facilitates such a project (Archer, 2003). Platform practices therefore exert influence only when teachers interpret what these technologies mean for their own pedagogical priorities, whether those involve supporting students or managing their own workload. Reflexivity is the medium through which structural and cultural pressures are translated into action.

This analysis adopts the logic of analytical dualism. Structure and culture do not act directly; their influence is understood through agents' reflexive deliberations. Archer contrasts this position with what she terms central conflation, exemplified in structuration theory, where structure and agency are treated as a single duality and their distinct causal properties become blurred (Archer, 1995). By maintaining an ontological distinction between structures, which lack consciousness, and agents, who possess reflexive capacities, Archer preserves explanatory clarity about how change and reproduction occur.

Archer further differentiates reflexivity according to dominant modes. Drawing on empirical research, she identifies communicative reflexives, who require dialogue with others to reach decisions; autonomous reflexives, who independently formulate and pursue strategic projects; meta-reflexives, who critically evaluate both their own commitments and the social order; and fractured reflexives, whose internal conversations fail to generate coherent courses of action (Archer, 2007; 2012). These modes help explain patterned differences in how actors respond to structural demands. In school contexts, communicative reflexives may collectively reinforce scepticism about data mandates through informal discussion, whereas autonomous reflexives may privately comply in pursuit of personal goals. The coexistence of multiple reflexive modes introduces further indeterminacy into the relationship between structural initiatives and organisational outcomes.

Reflexivity also highlights the emergent character of agency. Agents possess causal powers that cannot be reduced to structural position alone, including the capacity for conscious self-monitoring. This aligns with critical realism's emergentist ontology, in which individuals are understood as more than the bearers of roles or norms. Reflexivity therefore links Archer's morphogenetic cycle with the lived dynamics of platform governance. Structural and cultural conditions shape the context of action, yet it is through reflexive mediation that teachers and managers come to comply, accommodate, negotiate or resist.

Archer's theory of reflexivity therefore provides a micro-level explanatory mechanism that complements the morphogenetic account of social change. Within this thesis, it enables teachers' responses to digital governance to be interpreted not as automatic consequences of platform design or policy, but as reflexively mediated practices oriented towards particular concerns and projects.

Having established this account of agency, the chapter now turns explicitly to power. While Archer offers a robust framework for analysing conditioning, interaction and outcome, her treatment of power remains comparatively limited. The following section therefore examines Archer's account of power before extending it through Elder-Vass's concept of norm circles. It then moves to selected elements of the Foucauldian concept of governmentality in order to capture the normative and micro-physical dimensions of platform-mediated governance.

4.7 Archer's perspective on power and its limits

Archer's most notable discussion of social power appears in *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (1995:296–327), where power is examined primarily within the interaction phase (T_2 – T_3) of the morphogenetic cycle. She distinguishes between two related but analytically distinct concepts: bargaining power and negotiating strength. Together these ideas illustrate how unequal resource distributions shape participation in strategic interaction and how those resources are subsequently mobilised. They also provide a useful point of departure for the later discussion of norm circles and governmentality.

Bargaining power refers to the resource-based capacity that determines which agents are positioned to participate meaningfully in strategic interaction. Archer identifies the unequal distribution of valued resources – material, economic, organisational, symbolic and epistemic – as 'the bedrock of bargaining power' (Archer, 1995:298). Agents or groups who control these resources are able to enter arenas of consequential decision-making, whereas those who do not are largely excluded (Archer, 1995:299). Archer therefore differentiates between corporate agents, organised collectivities capable of articulating interests and pursuing projects, and primary agents, individuals who lack this level of collective organisation. In schools, bargaining power is typically concentrated within senior leadership teams through formal authority, control of budgets, access to information and evaluative infrastructures. Individual teachers, acting alone, possess limited bargaining power, although collective organisation through departments or unions may strengthen their professional position. Archer also includes knowledge and expertise within first-order resource distributions. In digitally mediated schools, competence in data systems or analytic practices can therefore function as a resource that enhances the bargaining position of staff.

Negotiating strength refers to the relational effectiveness with which agents deploy their resources within concrete interactions. It is not a fixed attribute but a situationally contingent capacity that exists only in relation to others (Archer, 1995:297). Negotiating strength depends upon strategy, coalition-building and ideological leverage. Archer emphasises that negotiating strength 'always [has] a cultural (ideological) component' (1995:302): claims must appear legitimate, persuasive or morally compelling if resources are to be converted into influence. One group may possess fewer formal resources yet exercise greater negotiating strength through superior organisation or moral

authority. A recent illustration is the joint statement on AI and EdTech published by nine UK education unions, including the NEU, which explicitly frames educator involvement as a professional and pedagogical imperative across every stage of AI adoption, from policy formation through to school-level implementation (National Education Union et al., 2024). The statement exemplifies how collective organisation can generate normative pressure and assert negotiating strength in an arena where formal bargaining rights remain underdeveloped. Crucially, negotiating strength converts the potential of bargaining power into concrete outcomes. As Archer (1995:326) observes, ‘...the bargaining power which is lodged in the first-order distribution of resources has to be converted into negotiating strength... for any specific emergent property to become elaborated or to stay in being’.

These distinctions can be located within the morphogenetic sequence. Structural conditions at T_1 distribute resources unevenly and thereby shape initial bargaining positions. During T_2 – T_3 , outcomes depend on whether and how those resources are mobilised in interaction. T_4 then registers either the reproduction or transformation of structural and cultural arrangements. Power, in Archer’s account, is therefore neither wholly structural nor purely agential. It is exercised through interaction under conditions shaped by prior distributions of resources.

In the context of digital governance in schools, bargaining power is concentrated among actors such as government departments, education unions, Multi-Academy Trust executives and senior leaders, whose authority, control of funding and access to data infrastructures position them to mandate platform adoption. Teachers may acquire limited bargaining power through collective organisation or through control of scarce expertise, for example when only a small number of staff understand a system’s technical operation. Negotiating strength becomes visible in the ways these resources are mobilised. Leaders may frame platform adoption in terms of modernisation or improvement, while teachers may coordinate coping strategies or raise collective concerns about workload or surveillance. Whether platform governance becomes tightly enforced or more loosely negotiated therefore depends not only on resource distributions but also on how actors organise and deploy those resources.

Archer’s inclusion of knowledge and expertise as resources also points to a convergence with Foucauldian concerns. Expertise is not simply a neutral asset; it shapes what counts as legitimate knowledge and credible speech within organisational settings. Actors who can speak the language of data analytics may command greater institutional authority, while those who cannot may find themselves marginalised. Archer acknowledges the ideological dimension of negotiating strength but does not develop a detailed account of how norms and subjectivities become organised and sustained. Nor does she fully examine how these formations vary across actors and institutional settings. From a Foucauldian perspective, these tensions are not external to prevailing regimes of power–knowledge but form part of their operation; even practices understood as resistance remain embedded within the epistemic conditions that make them possible.

Two extensions therefore help to broaden the explanatory reach of the CR framework. First, Elder-Vass's (2010) concept of norm circles specifies how networks of mutual endorsement and sanction generate normative cohesion and shape what actors perceive as acceptable or legitimate. Norm circles operate alongside bargaining arenas, influencing whether collective agency forms and how resources are mobilised. Second, Foucauldian governmentality, while not in agreement with central tenets of CR, directs attention to the techniques through which subjects are formed and conduct is steered, even where overt conflict is absent. Together these perspectives show how power operates through normalisation and self-regulation embedded in organisational routine, as well as through strategic contestation.

Archer's framework already gestures towards cultural influence through her recognition of the ideological component of negotiating strength. However, she does not specify *how* such cultural forces become organised or reproduced. This analytic gap provides the entry point for norm circles as a meso-level mechanism of normative power. The following section develops this concept in order to extend the explanatory framework.

4.8 Elder-Vass's norm circles: meso-level mechanisms of normative power

Dave Elder-Vass's theory of norm circles (2010; 2012) extends the realist framework by clarifying how norms acquire causal force through collective endorsement and sanction. Broadly compatible with Archer's emergentist account of normativity, it nonetheless departs from her earlier conception of culture as a relatively autonomous system of ideas. A norm circle consists of a group of individuals who sustain a norm by approving behaviour that conforms to it and disapproving behaviour that deviates from it; through these patterned responses, the norm becomes socially efficacious. This concept is particularly useful for analysing digital governance in schools because it helps explain why platform-related practices are often followed even in the absence of direct enforcement.

This shift entails a partial divergence from Archer's (1988) notion of propositional culture, itself grounded in Popper's concept of World 3 (Popper, 1972). Whereas Archer's cultural system foregrounds the logical relations between ideas as relatively autonomous from social interaction, Elder-Vass reorients analysis towards the dynamics of socio-cultural practice. Norm circles move the focus from a disembodied system of ideas to the active maintenance of norms through ongoing processes of endorsement and sanction within social networks (Elder-Vass, 2012: 20–22), offering a more interactionally grounded account of how cultural powers are exercised in everyday settings.

Norm circles operate at the meso level, mediating between macro-structural arrangements and the micro-level deliberations of individual actors. In Archerian terms, they shape situational logics at

T₁ by establishing what is taken as normal or legitimate, and they form part of the interactional context at T₂–T₃ through peer approval and disapproval. They also provide a mechanism through which bargaining power is translated into negotiating strength. Where Archer notes that resources must be mobilised through ideology and organisation (1995:326–327), norm circles provide a concrete account of how such ideological alignment is generated and sustained through everyday interaction.

Elder-Vass (2010) illustrates the concept through the norm of queueing, maintained through the reactions of those who endorse and sanction transgression. A similar dynamic operates in schools. A norm such as ‘teachers should keep platform data up to date’ may be endorsed by senior leaders through repeated emphasis in meetings, reinforced by those who model and praise compliance, and sustained through appraisal judgments or informal reminders. Those who enact these endorsements and sanctions collectively constitute a norm circle, generating a field of normative pressure in which non-compliance is experienced not merely as a technical lapse but as a socially visible deviation.

Norm circles do not function as corporate agents in Archer’s sense, since they lack unified intentionality; they nonetheless enable and stabilise corporate agency by aligning expectations and behaviours. A leadership team’s capacity to exercise power is strengthened where a supportive norm circle has already normalised particular managerial practices. Conversely, teachers may participate in circles that sustain counter-norms, such as valuing individual judgment over strict data compliance, providing collective moral support for selective or symbolic compliance and thereby quietly limiting the reach of platform governance.

Norm circles are emergent entities. They depend on the actions of individuals, yet once established they exert downward causal influence by shaping expectations of approval and disapproval (Elder-Vass, 2010: 58–62). This exemplifies critical realism’s relational ontology, in which patterns of interaction generate relatively enduring causal mechanisms that subsequently condition behaviour. Normative power is thus neither purely structural nor purely individual, but relational and emergent.

The explanatory significance of norm circles lies in the question they help address within Archer’s framework: why do individuals frequently comply with expectations even when no one is overtly coercing them? The answer often lies in the normative environments created by peers, where belonging, recognition and moral legitimacy are at stake. Compliance and resistance are socially embedded practices shaped by the reactions of others, rarely occurring in isolation.

The embedding of platform practices is therefore likely to depend on the configuration of norm circles within a particular school. Where influential circles strongly endorse platform use as a marker of professionalism, compliance may become largely self-policing; where they are

ambivalent or critical, implementation is more likely to remain partial or unevenly negotiated. Norm circles thereby provide a meso-level mechanism for explaining why similar technological infrastructures can produce different normative climates across organisational settings.

Norm circles also sit comfortably alongside Foucauldian insights that power frequently operates in productive and internalised forms, rather than solely through repression, illustrating one pathway through which individuals come to regulate their own conduct in line with prevailing expectations. This prepares the ground for the following section, which introduces governmentality as a complementary lens for examining how power operates through norms, knowledge and self-regulation within platform-mediated schooling.

4.9 Foucauldian concepts within the governmentality framework

‘Governmentality (gouvernementalité) refers to the conduct of conduct, especially the technologies through which individuals are governed. It captures the ways in which governments and other actors draw upon knowledge to shape policies and regulate subjectivities’ (Bevir, 2010:423).

As already set out, this thesis is based around a critical realist conception of structure and agency. However, at this point a consideration is made for integrating a seemingly incompatible conceptual approach. This section considers Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality as being able to be applied selectively as an analytic of power for interpreting how digital platforms shape conduct within schools. To avoid conceptual fragmentation, the Foucauldian vocabulary is intentionally restricted to a small number of concepts that recur consistently throughout the analysis. Governmentality functions here as a supplementary analytic of power and is operationalised through three concepts: calculative practices, disciplinary techniques and subjectivation. Together these concepts provide the vocabulary through which patterns of visibility, comparison and self-regulating conduct are interpreted within the digitally mediated governance environments of the schools.¹⁸

Foucault’s concept of governmentality foregrounds how modern governance operates through the shaping of conduct and subjectivity. Governmentality refers to the ensemble of institutions, procedures, calculations and tactics through which the ‘conduct of conduct’ is organised (Foucault, 1991). It encompasses both governing rationalities, through which behaviour is rendered thinkable

¹⁸ Other Foucauldian terms are not treated as part of the thesis’s core analytic apparatus. Where necessary they are used descriptively rather than analytically. References to infrastructures such as dashboards, audit trails, thresholds and mandated workflows therefore describe the material means through which governance operates rather than introducing additional theoretical categories.

and problematised, and the practical techniques through which conduct is steered. Incorporating selected elements of this framework allows the analysis to address dispersed and routine modes of control that operate through surveillance, normalisation and subject formation, dimensions of power that are less fully specified within Archer's account of structural conditioning and corporate agency.

A central Foucauldian insight (Foucault, 1977; 1980) is that power does not operate solely through overt commands or visible conflict. It also functions through everyday organisational practices that structure visibility and comparison, shaping how individuals understand themselves and regulate their conduct. In this context, disciplinary techniques are enacted through infrastructures such as performance dashboards and observation systems that sustain conditions of continuous visibility. These arrangements rarely rely on coercion alone. Instead, they encourage anticipatory self-regulation through the routine operation of calculative practices and the gradual formation of professional subjectivities aligned with institutional expectations.

In digitally mediated schools these dynamics are intensified through data infrastructures. When assessment entries, behaviour logs and records of homework activity become routinely visible within platform systems, teachers operate within an electronic field of observation. Behaviour may therefore be adjusted pre-emptively to avoid the reputational damage and managerial scrutiny that comes with low performance indicators. Compliance becomes habitual and anticipatory as teachers orient their conduct towards the metrics through which professional performance is interpreted.

Normalisation is sustained through calculative practices. Targets, dashboards and performance categories construct models of the 'effective' teacher against which practice is evaluated. Deviations become visible through comparison and ranking. Teachers are positioned relative to implicit standards embedded within metrics and traffic-light systems, encouraging alignment with quantified expectations of performance. These dynamics intersect with norm circles, which reinforce expectations socially. Governmentality therefore highlights how benchmarking and comparison can shape conduct even in the absence of explicit peer sanction, establishing expectations that norm circles may subsequently reinforce.

This thesis does not adopt Foucault as its ontological foundation. Rather, governmentality is employed selectively as an analytic of power that complements, rather than contradicts, the critical realist framework. Although Foucauldian analysis is genealogical and problematising in orientation, it is sometimes mischaracterised as reducing reality to language.¹⁹ As Mills (1997:6–7) notes, Foucault's conception of discourse concerns regulated practices and the institutional rules

¹⁹ Although Foucault is often associated with linguistic constructivism, his use of discourse extends beyond language to include the material practices, institutional arrangements, and technologies through which power is exercised (Foucault, 1977; 1980).

that produce statements rather than merely linguistic utterances. Governmentality therefore attends to the material and technical organisation of power, including infrastructures and administrative routines.

Following Elder-Vass (2012:258), the position adopted here aligns with a form of ‘realist social constructionism’, acknowledging that knowledge is socially produced and power-laden while maintaining that structures and mechanisms possess causal efficacy beyond discourse. Al-Amoudi (2007) similarly suggests that Foucauldian analysis can be interpreted as implicitly recognising layered social reality, even where this is not articulated in depth-ontological terms.

Within this framework digital platforms can be understood as infrastructures through which governance operates. Platform dashboards and data entry systems structure how information becomes visible and comparable in schools. As these informational flows circulate through everyday administrative routines, conduct becomes observable and open to evaluation. Teachers may therefore come to be positioned as data-subjects whose professional standing is mediated through indicators and performance categories, echoing Ball’s (2003) analysis of performativity. This process of subjectivation shapes not only behaviour but also professional identity, aligning self-understandings with institutional expectations embedded in metrics and targets.

The addition of governmentality therefore extends the framework beyond strategic bargaining and resource mobilisation. Archer’s account clarifies how unequal resource distributions shape interaction among corporate agents. Foucault directs attention to how power operates beneath and beyond explicit conflict by shaping preferences, perceptions and self-understandings within regimes of visibility and comparison. Teachers may comply with platform expectations not because they have calculated resource advantages but because compliance has come to appear normal or professionally necessary within such regimes.

The synthesis remains grounded in critical realism. Platforms, data infrastructures and institutional rules are treated as real and causally consequential. Teachers retain reflexive capacities to interpret and respond to these conditions. Governmentality enriches the analysis by clarifying how disciplinary visibility, calculative practices and processes of subjectivation operate within particular structural and cultural contexts (see Figure 4.2). Self-discipline may therefore emerge through the interaction of platform-generated visibility, norm circles endorsing compliance and wider accountability regimes.

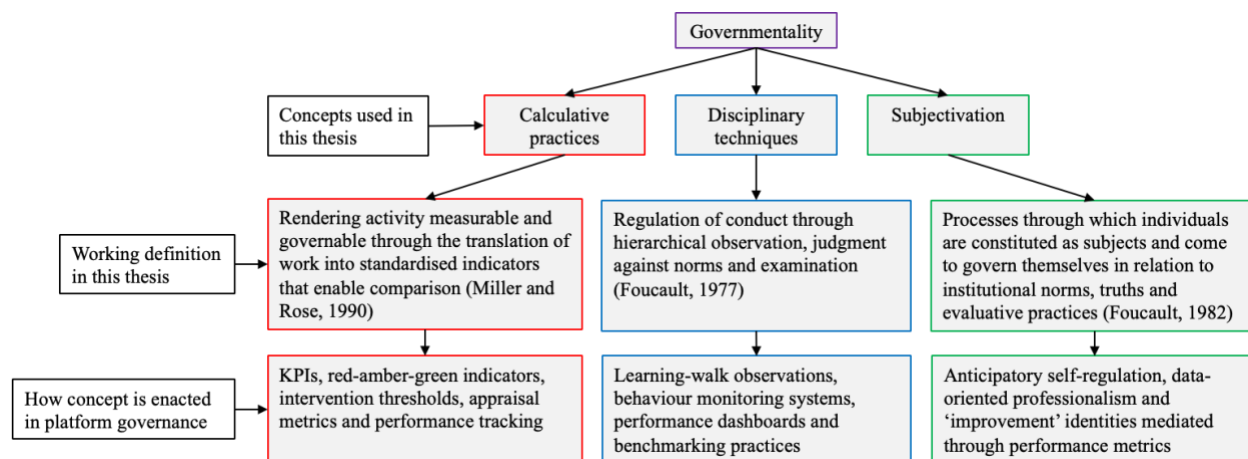


Figure 4.2: Foucauldian governmentality concepts used in the analysis.

Governmentality is therefore incorporated to clarify how power operates through routine practices and surveillance infrastructures, as well as through processes of subject formation. Retaining a realist foundation ensures that these dynamics are understood as embedded within stratified social systems characterised by causal mechanisms and reflexive agents. The resulting synthesis allows platform governance to be analysed without collapsing structure into normativity or reducing subject formation to one or the other. Crucially, this approach demonstrates the value of working across what are often presented as incompatible traditions. Foucauldian concepts are treated neither as a totalising framework to be adopted wholesale nor as a perspective to be dismissed; instead, they are used selectively where they offer clear explanatory value, particularly in making sense of everyday practices and the formation of teacher subjectivities. This selective integration strengthens the framework while maintaining ontological clarity. Platform governance is therefore understood not as the direct expression of formal structures, but as a contingent form of normative power mediated through norm circles within specific organisational contexts. It emerges through the interaction of structural conditions and shared expectations, taking shape through situated practices rather than operating as a fixed or uniform arrangement.

4.10 Integrating the theoretical models

My integration of critical realism, Archer's morphogenetic approach, Elder-Vass's concept of norm circles and selected elements of governmentality emerged from the explanatory demands that developed during the study. Although the two case schools adopted broadly similar digital platforms, their organisational trajectories diverged markedly. Explaining this divergence requires a framework that preserves analytical distinctions between structure, culture and agency, while also recognising that power operates through both strategic interaction and more diffuse

internalised processes. Only such an approach can account for how identical technological systems become implicated in different patterns of governance.

Critical realism provides the meta-theoretical foundation. Its stratified ontology enables movement from teachers' empirical accounts, to the organisational routines and interactions that structure their work, and then to the deeper structural and cultural mechanisms through which those routines are generated (Bhaskar, 2005[1979]; Sayer, 2000). This perspective situates platformisation within wider policy transformations associated with neoliberal reform and within the contrasting governance arrangements of a Multi-Academy Trust school and a Local Authority-maintained school. Digital platforms are therefore understood not as isolated tools but as components embedded within layered social systems possessing causal powers.

Archer's morphogenetic approach introduces a temporal and processual dimension to this analysis. By distinguishing structural and cultural conditioning (T_1), social interaction (T_2 – T_3) and elaboration or reproduction (T_4), it becomes possible to examine how platform introduction intersected with pre-existing organisational contexts and how agents' responses contributed to divergent outcomes (Archer, 1995; 2003). Reflexivity is central within this framework, highlighting how teachers deliberate upon, accommodate or resist platform-mediated expectations in relation to their own concerns and projects.

Elder-Vass's concept of norm circles becomes necessary once it is recognised that compliance and resistance are rarely purely individual accomplishments. Norm circles specify the mechanism through which norms acquire causal force through collective endorsement and sanction (Elder-Vass, 2010; 2012). They explain how expectations surrounding data use and platform compliance became stabilised and self-reinforcing in Matson Academy while remaining more plural and negotiable in Larwood School. In this way, norm circles clarify how digital systems gain traction only when their implicit standards are sustained by concrete social groupings.

Governmentality extends the framework by addressing forms of power that operate through visibility, comparison and self-regulation. Where Archer's model foregrounds resource distributions and strategic interaction among corporate agents, governmentality directs attention to how digital infrastructures shape conduct through daily routines, calculative practices and processes of subject formation (Foucault, 1977; 1991). It therefore provides conceptual leverage for analysing phenomena such as surveillance, normalisation and the internalisation of performance metrics that are not easily captured through a focus on overt negotiation alone.

These perspectives form a layered explanatory architecture. Critical realism supplies ontological depth and causal explanation; the morphogenetic approach provides temporal sequencing; norm circles identify mechanisms of collective normative endorsement; and governmentality sensitises the analysis to the micro-physics of digital visibility and subjectivation. This integrated framework

guides the subsequent empirical chapters and supports a differentiated account of how platform governance is reproduced, contested or transformed through the interaction of structural, cultural and agential dynamics across the two case schools.

4.11 Chapter summary

This chapter has developed the theoretical framework through which digital platform governance in English secondary schools is analysed. Critical realism was established as the foundational paradigm, providing a depth ontology centred on stratification, causal powers, open systems and emergence. This ontological orientation supports an explanatory approach that moves beyond surface description towards identifying the generative mechanisms through which digital platforms, organisational arrangements and professional practices are produced and reproduced. It also underpins the study's moderate social constructionist stance, acknowledging that knowledge is socially mediated while maintaining that social structures and relations possess causal efficacy.

On this foundation, Archer's morphogenetic approach was introduced as a temporally sensitive means of operationalising critical realism. By distinguishing structural and cultural conditioning (T_1), social interaction (T_2 – T_3) and elaboration or reproduction (T_4), the framework provides a process model for examining how platform adoption intersected with pre-existing organisational contexts and how agents' responses contributed to either morphogenesis or morphostasis. Archer's emphasis on analytical dualism and reflexivity foregrounds the mediating role of human agency, helping to explain why teachers confronted with similar digital mandates may arrive at divergent courses of action. Her account of power, through the distinction between bargaining power and negotiating strength, also clarifies how resource distributions shape participation in arenas of contestation and how outcomes depend on strategic mobilisation rather than structural position alone.

The chapter also highlighted the limits of relying on Archer's framework in isolation. To address these limits, Elder-Vass's concept of norm circles was incorporated as a meso-level mechanism of normative power. Norm circles clarify how shared expectations become stabilised through collective endorsement and sanction and how such expectations shape patterns of compliance or resistance. This addition helps explain how cultural expectations operate as causal forces within schools and why platform-related norms become self-reinforcing in some organisational contexts while remaining open to negotiation in others.

Selected elements of Foucauldian governmentality were then introduced to capture the micro-physical and subjective dimensions of power. Governmentality draws attention to the ways surveillance, normalisation and calculative rationalities shape conduct through routine practices and processes of self-regulation. Digital platforms can therefore be understood as technologies of

power that participate in subject formation, positioning teachers as data-visible and continuously evaluable. Used selectively and within a critical realist orientation, Foucauldian concepts extend the analysis without displacing realist commitments to causally efficacious structures and reflexive agency.

These perspectives form a layered explanatory critique. Critical realism provides ontological depth; the morphogenetic approach introduces temporal sequencing; norm circles specify how expectations are collectively reproduced; and governmentality attends to dispersed and internalised forms of power. The resulting synthesis allows platform governance to be analysed as an emergent configuration produced through the interaction of structural, cultural and agential dynamics across contrasting school contexts.

Chapter 5 translates these theoretical commitments into methodological practice. It explains how a critical realist comparative case study design, informed by retroduction and morphogenetic analysis, was used to investigate platform governance in the two schools. It also shows how reflexive thematic analysis was employed not merely to catalogue patterns but to develop explanatory accounts of the mechanisms underlying those patterns. In this way the methodology operationalises the theoretical framework developed in this chapter and provides the foundation for the empirical analysis that follows.

5 Methodology

5.1 Introduction

This chapter translates the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 4 into the research design adopted in this thesis. That framework triangulates three bodies of work: the labour process account of technology and control; the literature on technology and teacher professionalism; and Elder-Vass's norm circles, which supply the meso-level mechanism through which the first two are connected. Situated within critical realism, and read alongside Archer's morphogenetic approach and a selective Foucauldian lens, these commitments shaped the research design, data generation and analysis. The chapter begins by introducing the three research questions and showing how they emerged from the gaps identified in the literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3.

The literature reviewed in those chapters shows that English secondary schooling has been reorganised over several decades through neoliberal reform and New Public Management, and that academisation has concentrated managerial authority while weakening democratic oversight. Within these conditions, the labour process tradition provides a well-developed account of technology, control and deskilling, and of the later turn to normative control (2.4.4), while work on teacher professionalism traces the reconfiguration of autonomy from relative towards controlled and productive forms, in which self-regulation becomes tied to accountability (2.5). More recent scholarship on datafication, surveillance and platform power explains how digital infrastructures make teachers' work increasingly visible and open to intervention. What these literatures leave under-specified is where such pressures are enforced: the groups whose shared expectations make particular standards compelling within a school. Norm circles are therefore incorporated into the research design and analysis that follow to address this gap, rather than as an arbitrary theoretical preference (Kellogg et al., 2020; Selwyn, 2016; Elder-Vass, 2010).

Put simply, the structural and ideological conditions for digital governance in schools were established well before digital platforms became ubiquitous. What remains less well understood is how those conditions are realised within particular organisational settings. Existing research is extensive at the macro level but comparatively limited at the meso level of the school organisation (Selwyn, 2016; Williamson, 2017a). It rarely examines why similar digital systems produce different governance outcomes across contrasting institutional contexts; it more often focuses on students than teachers as the subjects of platform-based oversight; and it leaves the roles of leadership culture, normative formation and spatio-material conditions comparatively under-theorised. The synthesis tables concluding Chapters 2 and 3 (Tables 2.1 and 3.1) set out these gaps in greater detail.

It is from these gaps, rather than from prior assumptions about the role platforms play in schools, that the three research questions emerge. If the macro-level conditions are well established but their organisational enactment remains unclear, the first asks how digital platforms reshape managerial oversight and teacher autonomy within English state-maintained secondary schools. If comparable systems produce different outcomes across governance contexts, the second asks what underlying mechanisms and organisational conditions account for variation between Multi-Academy Trust and Local Authority settings. And if teachers' own responses influence how platform governance operates, the third asks how they interpret, negotiate and resist platform-based control, and how these practices in turn shape the conduct and governance of school life.

Framed in this way, the questions are explanatory rather than deductive. They do not seek to demonstrate a predetermined argument but instead move from observable changes in teachers' work towards the mechanisms that generate them and the forms of agency through which they are mediated. This progression, from observable practices to underlying mechanisms and situated responses, reflects the retroductive logic of critical realism adopted throughout the study. Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses through deduction, retroduction works backwards from empirical observations to infer the generative mechanisms capable of producing them.

These questions were refined over the course of the study, and the process of refinement is significant because it reflects the retroductive logic outlined above. The study was originally framed around a broader and more descriptive set of questions. The first asked how digital platforms were being used as pedagogic tools in English state-maintained secondary schools; the second asked whether, and how, existing relations between teachers and school management were affected by platform use; and the third asked how platforms contributed to or challenged teacher-management roles.

As the literature review developed and early engagement with the two case-study schools sharpened the analytical focus, the questions changed in three related ways. First, the pedagogical framing of the initial question was revised as it became clear that the digital platforms examined in this study were not primarily used by teachers as tools for classroom practice. Their significance instead concerned the ways in which they supported organisational processes, managerial oversight and accountability. The question was therefore reframed around how platform infrastructures reshape governance, teacher autonomy and the regulation of teachers' work. Second, the descriptive orientation of the original questions shifted towards explanation, focusing on the mechanisms and organisational conditions that generate particular outcomes, including the variation between Multi-Academy Trust and Local Authority settings that the comparative design was intended to explain. Third, teachers' position as reflexive agents, who interpret, negotiate and resist rather than simply absorb platform demands, became central to the third question.

***RQ1:** How do digital platforms restructure managerial oversight and teacher autonomy within English state-maintained secondary schools?*

***RQ2:** What underlying mechanisms and organisational conditions help to explain variation in platform governance and staff experience across different school governance contexts (Multi-Academy Trust and Local Authority)?*

***RQ3:** In what ways do teachers interpret, negotiate and resist platform-based control, and how do these practices shape the conduct and governance of school life?*

The remainder of this chapter explains how these questions are addressed. Rather than being applied deductively to the empirical material, they are developed through engagement with it. The comparative case-study design provides the basis for inferring the mechanisms that generate variation, while the five-stage analytic process progresses from thematic familiarisation to retroductive inference and morphogenetic synthesis. The sections that follow explain how each element was developed for that purpose.

5.2 Comparative case-study design and justification – Academy vs LA governance

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case-study design grounded in critical realism. The aim is not simply to document digital governance practices in schools, but to explain how digital platforms interact with institutional and spatio-material structures in shaping teacher–manager relations (Bhaskar, 2008a[1975]; 2005[1979]). Consistent with a critical realist logic of inquiry, the analysis seeks to identify the generative mechanisms through which observed practices arise rather than treating those practices as self-explanatory.

Yin (2009:18) defines a case study as ‘an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident’. Yin (2003:16) further observes that this approach is particularly suited to ‘exploratory and explanatory research’, especially where technological systems, institutional governance and everyday practices are closely entangled and cannot be meaningfully separated. Stake (1995:237) likewise describes case-study research as ‘both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning’. These perspectives resonate with the critical realist commitment to examining lived experiences while situating them within the deeper material and ideational conditions that generate empirical phenomena.

The research employs a two-case design with embedded units of analysis, allowing detailed intra- and inter-case comparison. Two similarly sized state-maintained secondary schools in England were selected:

- **School 1 – Matson Academy (pseudonym):** part of a centrally governed Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) with substantial institutional autonomy over procurement, digital strategy and staffing.
- **School 2 – Larwood School (pseudonym):** a Local Authority (LA)-maintained secondary school operating within LA regulatory frameworks and shared administrative systems.

Each school constitutes a discrete organisation occurring within a bounded context, with embedded sub-units comprising senior leaders, middle managers, classroom teachers and support staff (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 25). This embedded design enables close analysis of how digital governance is enacted within organisational routines while supporting systematic comparison across governance contexts. As outlined in Chapter 3, the shift from local authority coordination towards Multi-Academy Trust governance reflects broader New Public Management reforms, including increased managerial autonomy and the reconfiguration of accountability and oversight. The comparison is therefore theoretically grounded in these system-level transformations. It is not intended to isolate governance structure as a single causal variable, nor to attribute variation to technology alone; rather, contrasting the two settings creates an empirical basis for examining why digital platformisation consolidates into tightly coupled regimes of surveillance and datafication in some contexts yet remains fragmented, negotiated or weakly enforced in others. Comparison functions as a mechanism-generating strategy within a retroductive research logic, in which empirical patterns inform the inference of plausible underlying causal powers and tendencies (Danermark et al., 2002). The aim is therefore not statistical generalisation but theoretically informed explanation of how governance arrangements interact with local histories, leadership practices and normative climates to shape different trajectories of platform governance.

In line with Bhaskar's (2005[1979]) realist imperative, the case-study design seeks to identify deeper causal mechanisms of power rather than remaining at the level of surface description. Contrasting a MAT academy and an LA-maintained school allows examination of how differing governance rationalities generate distinct patterns of staff conduct, a process interpreted through a selective Foucauldian lens of governmentality (Foucault, 1991). It also enables analysis of how normative pressures vary between settings, for example how senior leadership teams, departmental groupings or informal peer networks operate as distinct norm circles (Elder-Vass, 2010) that collectively endorse, sustain or contest particular platform practices.

Attention to historical and institutional context reflects Archer's morphogenetic perspective, recognising that pre-existing structural and cultural conditions at T_1 shape subsequent interaction (T_2 – T_3) and emergent outcomes (T_4) over time (Archer, 1995; 1998). Digital platformisation is therefore treated not as a discrete intervention but as a process unfolding within longer trajectories of organisational change, leadership stability or instability and shifting professional cultures.

Data collection within this design was multi-modal, combining semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected, stratified sample of participants (Campbell et al., 2020), documentary analysis and informal observation, allowing a multi-perspectival account of how platformisation reshapes teacher–manager power relations (Hocking, 2015). This pluralistic strategy reflects the critical realist preference for multiple forms of evidence when investigating underlying structures and mechanisms (Wynn and Williams, 2012); the sources, and their respective contributions, are detailed in Section 5.3.

Finally, the two cases were approached from different vantage points: Matson Academy through an insider position shaped by prior employment at the site, and Larwood School as an external researcher. This combination of embedded and external perspectives strengthened the comparative design (Berger, 2015); its methodological implications, and the reflexivity it required, are discussed in Sections 5.3 and 5.5.

Considered together, this comparative design allows the study to examine how digital platformisation is enacted differently within MAT and LA governance environments, situating participant experiences within wider structural and cultural conditions while remaining focused on generative mechanisms and stratified causation (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Danermark et al., 2002).

5.2.1 Matson Academy case study

Overview and governance structure

Matson Academy is a large co-educational secondary school with a Sixth Form located in the East of England. At the time of fieldwork the school enrolled approximately 1,936 students aged 11–18, including around 370 in the Sixth Form. Matson Academy forms part of the Elmwood Learning Partnership (ELP), a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) created in 2024 through the merger of two pre-existing trusts. The ELP comprises two secondary schools and five primary schools, with Matson Academy occupying a strategically significant position within trust-wide planning and development.

Governance is strongly centralised at trust level. The MAT is led by a Chief Executive Officer (Duncan Hale, pseudonym) and overseen by a Board of Trustees chaired by Geoffrey Lund (pseudonym). Core services including human resources, finance and site management are administered centrally, while school-level leaders operate within frameworks defined by the trust. On-site leadership at Matson Academy consists of a Principal (Stephen Ollerton, pseudonym, internally promoted in 2019), a Head of School (Joanne Exley, pseudonym) and a wider Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Since converting to academy status in 2011 the school has undergone

sustained organisational change, including major campus redevelopment and an increasing reliance on digital platforms for coordination, monitoring and communication.

These characteristics form important structural conditioning factors (T_1) within the analysis. MAT governance and delegated operational responsibility combine to produce an institutional environment in which organisational autonomy is formally extended while internal managerial oversight is intensified. This pattern reflects wider developments in academised schooling, where independence from local authority control is accompanied by strengthened intra-organisational regulation.

Organisational timeline

Several institutional developments in Matson Academy's recent history have shaped its organisational and digital trajectory. These are summarised in Figure 5.1 and include academy conversion, leadership changes, campus redevelopment and successive waves of platform adoption. These developments provide historical context for understanding how current governance arrangements and digital infrastructures emerged and why particular organisational practices have become established within the school.

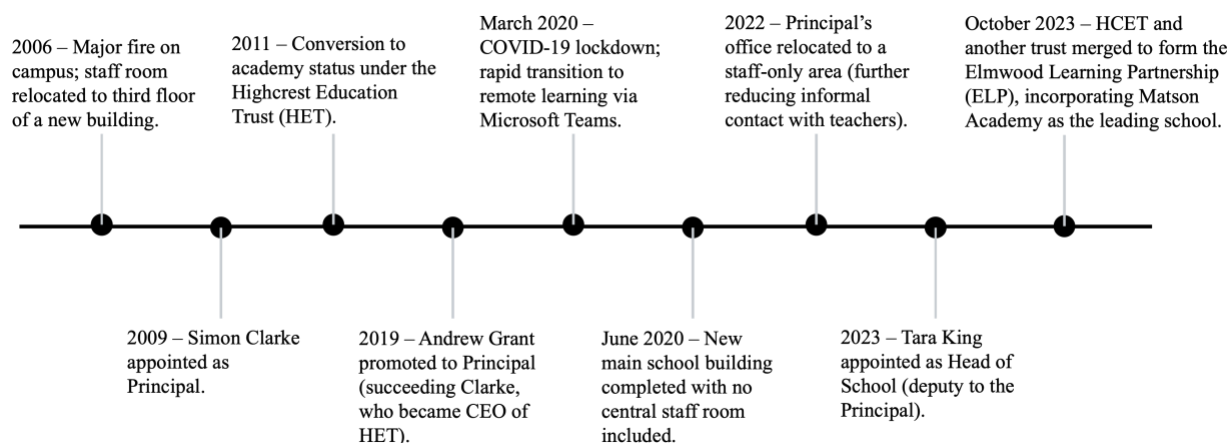


Figure 5.1: Key institutional events at Matson Academy.

Temporal organisation of the school day

The school day at Matson Academy follows a tightly structured timetable consisting of five hour-long teaching periods, centrally scheduled briefing and registration sessions and routine expectations for after-school provision such as revision sessions, clubs and targeted interventions. This temporal organisation reflects a disciplined institutional environment in which staff and

student time is carefully regulated. A detailed breakdown of the daily timetable is provided in Appendix A.

Digital infrastructure and platform use

Matson Academy operates within a densely integrated digital environment characterised by high platform density and strong organisational standardisation. Multiple systems mediate core administrative and pedagogical functions.

- **Management Information Systems (MIS):** SIMS remains in use for legacy student records and statutory reporting, alongside Go4Schools for assessment tracking, pastoral information, parental engagement and class registers.

- **Learning management and communication:** Satchel One (formerly Show My Homework) is used for homework setting and tracking and has expanded to incorporate behaviour management, attendance monitoring, rewards and sanctions. During the fieldwork period behaviour logging was transitioning from Go4Schools to Satchel One. The Microsoft Office 365 suite underpins communication and collaboration, with Teams used for virtual meetings, Outlook for email and SharePoint/OneDrive for document storage and collaborative work in accordance with trust-wide policies.

- **Performance management:** BlueSky was previously used for staff appraisal and professional development, although senior leaders elected not to renew the licence because of concerns regarding its suitability.

- **Safeguarding and specialist systems:** MyConcern supports safeguarding and pastoral reporting, Unifrog is used for careers guidance, SchoolCloud facilitates online parent meetings and TeamSOS manages incident reporting and emergency communication.

- **Access and monitoring:** An electronic signing-in system records staff attendance and site access in accordance with safeguarding and health-and-safety requirements.

As a collective these systems produce a highly platformised organisational ecology in which routine practices such as taking registers, setting homework and recording behaviour are mediated through digital infrastructures. The MAT's central ICT strategy has played a significant role in this process by promoting platform uniformity across schools within the trust and expanding managerial visibility.

Professional culture and recent changes

Professional culture at Matson Academy has evolved alongside these structural and technological developments. The removal of a central staffroom following the 2020 campus redevelopment, together with the relocation of the Principal's office to a restricted-access area, has materially and symbolically reshaped patterns of staff interaction. Teachers are now primarily located within departmental spaces or individual classrooms, reducing opportunities for informal cross-departmental encounter.

At the same time the expansion of data dashboards and routine 'learning walks' conducted by senior leaders has contributed to an environment characterised by heightened visibility. Many staff described a prolonged period of adjustment during which perceptions of trust and professional autonomy were unsettled by the cumulative effects of platform monitoring and observational practices. Some participants nevertheless acknowledged practical efficiencies in communication and data access.

These features together outline a structural-cultural context in which digital infrastructures, spatial arrangements and governance logics are closely intertwined. They establish the contextual baseline for interpreting later findings concerning surveillance, compliance, resistance and reflexive agency within Matson Academy.

5.2.2 Larwood School case study

Overview and governance structure

Larwood School is a mixed 11–18 comprehensive secondary school in a more rural area in the same region as Matson Academy. Larwood School educates approximately 1,884 students, including around 353 in the Sixth Form. Unlike Matson Academy, Larwood School remains under Local Authority (LA) governance and is therefore one of the few non-academy secondary schools in the region. The college operates across two nearby campuses, with a school minibus transporting students and staff between sites:

- **Meadow Campus** – main site for Years 7–11
- **Oakbridge Campus** – Sixth Form centre for Years 12–13

Governance sits within the County Council, to which the school is formally accountable. The LA retains authority over areas such as admissions, special educational needs provision and certain procurement decisions. All of this limits the degree of institutional autonomy available to school leaders. Human resources and finance systems are integrated with LA infrastructures, embedding the college within wider local government administrative arrangements. A Governing Body,

including staff and parent representatives, provides school-level oversight, although major strategic initiatives generally require LA approval or alignment with county-wide priorities.

Internally, Larwood School is led by a Headteacher (Ruth Calloway, pseudonym), supported by a Deputy Headteacher, several Assistant Headteachers and faculty heads. While this leadership structure resembles that of Matson Academy in formal terms, the absence of a Multi-Academy Trust means that Larwood School operates without supra-school executive control. Decision-making therefore reflects a combination of LA regulation and school-level negotiation rather than centralised trust direction.

These characteristics constitute key structural conditioning factors (T_1) for the study. In contrast to the highly centralised governance environment of Matson Academy, Larwood School's LA-maintained status produces a more constrained but less standardised organisational context. This difference has important implications for the pace and consistency with which digital platforms are adopted and integrated.

Since 2021 the school has also experienced considerable leadership instability. Following the retirement of long-serving Headteacher Eileen Shore (pseudonym; 2005–2021), the school was led by a short-term headteacher, and the current Principal then took up the role on an interim basis in 2023, with the appointment made permanent in 2024. This turnover has affected the continuity of strategic direction and contributed to a fragmented governance culture, particularly in relation to systems and policy.

Organisational timeline

Key institutional developments shaping Larwood School's recent trajectory are summarised in Figure 5.2. These include leadership turnover, shifts in platform provision and evolving whole-school initiatives. Together these developments provide context for understanding the school's pattern of platform instability and organisational drift.

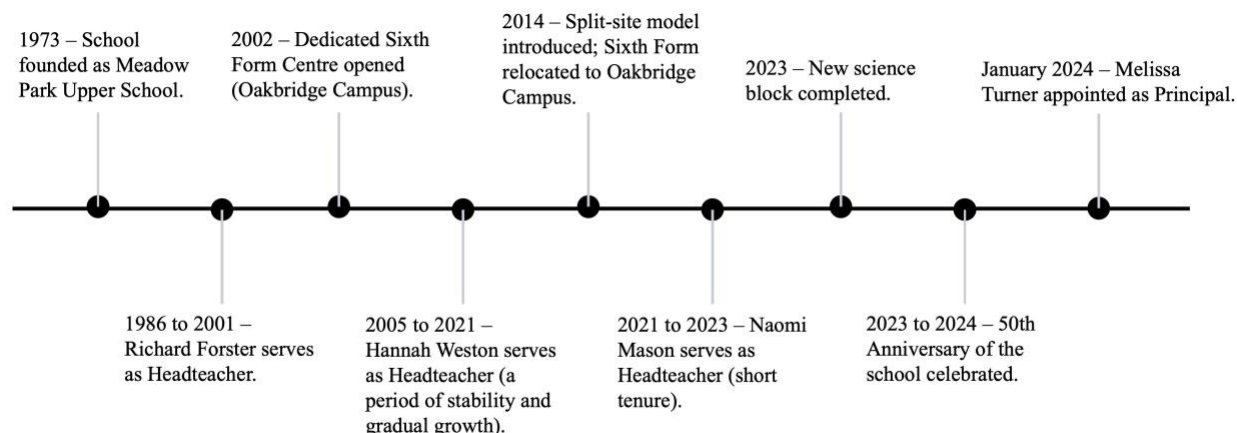


Figure 5.2: Key institutional events at Larwood School.

Digital infrastructure and platform use

Larwood School's digital environment is comparatively less centralised and less uniform than that of Matson Academy, reflecting its LA-maintained status, budgetary constraints and the absence of a trust-wide digital strategy. Core systems include:

- **Management Information Systems (MIS):** SIMS remains in use for statutory and administrative functions, with a planned transition to Arbor repeatedly delayed at the time of fieldwork. Go4Schools is used for monitoring student performance and behaviour, although engagement varies significantly between departments.
- **Learning platforms:** Google Classroom functions as the dominant learning platform, supporting resource distribution, assignment submission and teacher–student communication. Chromebooks are issued to staff and the school marked its transition to Google Workspace through a whole-school 'G Day'. Microsoft Teams plays only a limited role, largely confined to virtual meetings.
- **Communication and administration:** Gmail is used for staff email as part of Google Workspace. In the absence of a trust-wide IT policy, departments retain considerable discretion, with some continuing to rely on spreadsheets or paper-based systems alongside official platforms. Microsoft StaffHub is used for staff announcements but remains weakly integrated with teaching or data systems.
- **Behaviour and site systems:** Behaviour is recorded through Go4Schools, although patterns of use and enforcement differ between departments. Electronic entry and signing-in systems are

applied inconsistently across sites, with paper-based sign-in persisting in some areas. SchoolCloud supports online parent–teacher consultations.

Overall, Larwood School’s digital infrastructure is characterised by fragmentation and relatively weak standardisation. In the three years preceding fieldwork the school moved from Go4Schools to Class Charts, then back to Go4Schools, while preparing for a transition to Arbor. These changes were driven less by long-term strategic planning than by leadership turnover and financial constraint. A ransomware attack in September 2020 further compounded this instability, disrupting data continuity and contributing to the delay in migrating from SIMS to Arbor that continued at the time of fieldwork. Although the adoption of Google Workspace was presented as a whole-school initiative, its practical development occurred largely through decentralised, teacher-led experimentation. The resulting configuration resembles a patchwork of systems marked by inconsistent training, variable expectations and uneven staff engagement.

In contrast to the trust-led model of platform governance at Matson Academy, Larwood School therefore exhibits a looser and more negotiable digital ecology in which platform use is shaped as much by departmental norms and individual preference as by formal policy.

Professional culture and context

Larwood School retains a strong community-oriented ethos linked to its rural setting and its long-standing role as the principal secondary school serving a dispersed catchment area. Long-serving staff and community governors contribute to a professional culture that historically operated with a relatively laissez-faire approach to individual teacher discretion, with an emphasis on trust and relationality. Compared with Matson Academy, performance monitoring has been less overt and less tightly coupled to digital metrics.

National accountability pressures, including Ofsted inspections and examination performance, have nevertheless increasingly filtered into local governance practices. LA-led initiatives such as a county-wide attendance data improvement programme in 2021 have periodically intensified the emphasis on data. Staff therefore described an organisational environment in which collegial norms coexist with emerging digital pressures.

Participants expressed mixed responses to the planned transition to Arbor. Some anticipated greater efficiency and relief from the administrative fragmentation of existing systems. Others feared that the change would introduce more intensive surveillance and workload demands similar to those reported in academised contexts. This ambivalence reflects Larwood School’s position as an organisational hybrid, retaining elements of a collegial professional culture while becoming progressively exposed to platform-driven forms of governance.

Access and researcher positionality

Access to Larwood School was negotiated through professional networks and early communication with senior leaders regarding the aims of the study. In contrast to my insider status at Matson Academy, I entered Larwood School as an external researcher, although with a professional connection through a former colleague. This outsider positioning afforded greater critical distance, while rapport was established through formal introductions and informal preliminary visits to both campuses.

Repeated site visits allowed familiarity with everyday routines and informal staff interactions, providing contextual grounding for subsequent interviews. Although some staff initially expressed caution towards an external researcher, transparency about my background as both a teacher and doctoral researcher helped build trust.

The contrast between insider positioning at Matson Academy and outsider positioning at Larwood School strengthened the comparative design by providing different vantage points on similar organisational phenomena. It also required sustained reflexivity to avoid assuming shared meanings in the first case or misinterpreting local norms in the second. These positional dynamics are discussed further in Section 5.5.

5.2.3 Summary tables – organisational and digital contrasts

The following tables provide condensed comparative overviews of key organisational and governance features of the two case-study schools. They summarise the structural and cultural conditioning contexts (T_1) within which platform governance is enacted in each setting. The intention is not to reduce the cases to simplified contrasts but to establish an analytical reference point for examining how governance arrangements, leadership configurations and material conditions shape subsequent patterns of interaction and teacher agency.

These summaries provide a baseline for identifying similarities and divergences between the MAT and LA contexts. The contrasts outlined here are examined empirically through the thematic analyses in Chapters 6 and 7 and are revisited in the cross-case synthesis in Chapter 8, where they inform retroductive inference concerning underlying generative mechanisms.

Aspect	Matson Academy	Larwood School
Governance model	Multi-Academy Trust (Elmwood Learning Partnership)	Local Authority (East of England)
Student enrolment	≈1,936 (11–18), including ≈370 Sixth Form students	≈1,884 (11–18), including ≈353 Sixth Form students
Campus structure	Single large campus with new main school building (opened 2020)	Split site: Meadow Campus (11–16) and Oakbridge Sixth Form Campus (16–18)
Leadership	Stephen Ollerton (Principal), Duncan Hale (CEO of Trust), Joanne Exley (Head of School)	Ruth Calloway (Headteacher since 2023, initially on an interim basis; pseudonym), preceded by Sally Quigley (pseudonym) and Eileen Shore (pseudonym)
EdTech strategy	Centrally led platform adoption (Satchel One, Go4Schools, SIMS)	Decentralised and fragmented platform use, shaped by LA procurement
Digital platform stability	Greater continuity in platform use and compliance expectations	Frequent transitions and lower platform enforcement
Staffroom provision	Main staffroom removed in 2020; Sixth Form staffroom repurposed for ICT	Dedicated staffrooms retained on both campuses
Return post-pandemic	Full-scale platformisation and structural changes post-2020	Less structural change; more informal culture and slower digital uptake
Timetable	5 periods per day (08:25–15:10), with optional after-school activities	4–5 periods per day, with enrichment (15:25–16:40); separate Sixth Form timetable

Table 5.1: Summary overview of the case study schools' organisational structures.

A detailed overview of the schools' digital infrastructures is provided in Appendix B.

The term 'digital platforms' is used throughout the thesis as an umbrella category rather than as a claim that all systems perform identical functions. Across the two schools, three broad and partially overlapping types of platform were present. First, administrative and regulatory systems, particularly Management Information Systems such as SIMS and the planned migration to Arbor, organised pupil records, attendance, timetabling and reporting requirements. Secondly, classroom and communication platforms, including Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams and Satchel One, mediated homework, resource sharing, communication and aspects of classroom management. Thirdly, performance-tracking and monitoring platforms, especially Go4Schools, supported assessment, behaviour logging, attendance visibility and parental reporting.

Treating these systems collectively as digital platforms allows the analysis to examine how technologies with distinct operational functions become articulated within a wider organisational environment characterised by governance, visibility and normative expectation.

5.3 Data sources and collection methods

Having outlined the two case contexts, the study drew on several qualitative sources to investigate how digital platform governance is enacted and contested within each school. Consistent with a critical realist orientation, data collection was designed to generate material capable of informing retroductive explanation rather than merely describing observable practices. Interviews, observation and documentary evidence were therefore combined in order to illuminate different dimensions of the phenomenon.

Interviews provided access to participants' interpretations of digital governance and their experiences of working within platform-mediated environments. Observations focused on everyday organisational routines through which platforms became embedded. Policy documents and internal communications, meanwhile, revealed the institutional rationalities and technical infrastructures through which governance was formally articulated. Considering these sources together allowed the analysis to relate personal accounts and observed practices to the conditions within which they were produced.

Interviews in both schools were guided by role-specific, semi-structured interview schedules (Appendix C). A separate schedule was prepared for each category of participant, including senior leaders, middle leaders, classroom teachers, support and technical staff, and external interviewees such as the union regional official, ensuring that questions reflected the responsibilities and experiences associated with each role. The range of schedules was adapted to the participants represented at each site. Despite these differences, all schedules addressed a common set of topics.

The common themes were:

- platform use; platform selection and implementation;
- teacher–manager relations;
- data, accountability and surveillance;
- the spatial organisation of work, which received particular emphasis at Larwood School.

Retaining these shared themes across both case studies enabled comparison across roles within each school and between the two governance settings. This structured yet flexible approach provided a consistent thematic basis for comparison while allowing the semi-structured format to accommodate variations in question wording and order, pursue unanticipated lines of enquiry, and give participants space to raise issues of their own.

5.3.1 Data collection at Matson Academy

Matson Academy formed the principal case study and was approached through an insider researcher position, shaped by prior professional involvement in the organisation. I had previously worked at the school as a teacher for four years, spanning the period before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This position provided a form of participant observation grounded in sustained engagement with the setting (Becker, 2017; Musante and DeWalt, 2010), alongside the forms of access and contextual understanding associated with insider research (Mercer, 2007). It also informed an autoethnographic starting point for the study, in which my personal experience contributed to the identification of the research problems and framing of inquiry (Ellis et al., 2011).

This experience provided detailed familiarity with the school's culture and routines, as well as direct exposure to organisational changes associated with digital platform adoption and spatial reconfiguration. It shaped my initial understanding of both the specific institutional context and the broader dynamics of digital governance that underpin the rationale for this PhD. These experiences formed the issues that later became central to the analysis, while subsequent data collection and theoretical development enabled critical distance from my initial understandings.

The analysis was guided by a critical realist socio-technical and spatio-material perspective, attentive to how platforms and organisational routines interact with spatial and material arrangements to shape conditions of visibility and control. Over time it became clear that power relations were increasingly mediated through systems such as Go4Schools, Satchel One and SIMS, recalibrating expectations around accountability and compliance. Observational material was considered alongside interview accounts. For example, witnessing a teacher's workaround for a platform constraint later provided context for that teacher's interview description of 'bypassing the system'.

Formal interviews at Matson Academy took place across two phases of fieldwork (June 2024 and October 2024) using a semi-structured format. Access was facilitated by a former colleague who had since taken on a senior leadership role, enabling contact with a broad cross-section of the school community. Participants included members of the Senior Leadership Team, trust-level managers, middle leaders, heads of department, classroom teachers and support staff. This purposive and stratified sampling approach allowed the study to capture multiple perspectives on Matson Academy's post-pandemic digital transformation.

Organisation case study: Matson Academy		
Code	Name (pseudonym)	Job Title (anonymised)
RU	Rory Uttley	Senior technical staff (Trust level)
ND	Neil Draycott	Senior leader (post-16); Teacher
MH	Marcus Holden	Assistant Principal
FM	Fiona Merrick	Head of Department (Social Sciences)
OR	Owen Radley	Post-16 leadership role; Teacher
TF	Tom Fairley	Student support role (support staff)
AD	Amy Denning	Teacher
RD	Rachel Dunmore	Teacher; Head of Department (Social Sciences)
PE	Peter Ellery	Senior classroom teacher (Social Sciences)
YM	Yvonne Marsden	Head of Faculty
SP	Sadie Padgett	Head of Department (vocational subjects)
DF	Declan Frost	National Education Union, regional official

Table 5.2: Matson Academy interview participants and their roles.

Interviews were typically conducted on site in classrooms, offices or shared spaces depending on availability. Most lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes, although several extended beyond two hours. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and stored on the University of Essex encrypted cloud system. Transcripts were generated using Otter.ai and subsequently checked manually against recordings before being imported into qualitative analysis software and organised into preliminary coding categories.

The interview guide ensured coverage of key themes but was used flexibly. Conversations often developed informally, encouraging reflective and candid responses. Familiarity with the school environment helped establish rapport quickly and allowed discussion to move readily towards issues of digital surveillance, managerial oversight, professional identity and resistance. Allowing participants to shape the direction of conversation frequently revealed forms of tacit negotiation and creative compliance that might not have emerged through a more rigid questioning format (Mills, 2001).

Alongside interviews, sustained observation took place during site visits. My enhanced DBS clearance enabled movement around the school without escort. I attended departmental meetings and spent time in staff bases, including informal conversations (Burgess, 2003). These interactions revealed tensions and workarounds that were not always articulated in interviews, enriching the analytical depth of the study.

My previous employment at Matson Academy created both opportunities and responsibilities. Existing relationships facilitated trust and openness, but I remained attentive to my dual role as former colleague and researcher. Participation was emphasised as voluntary and non-evaluative. In accordance with BERA (2018) guidelines, all participants received information sheets, provided informed consent and were reminded of their right to withdraw. Pseudonyms and initials were used throughout, and ethical approval was granted by the University of Essex (2024).

The Matson Academy fieldwork combined prolonged engagement, embedded observation and multi-level interviewing to generate a detailed account of how platformisation has reshaped everyday staff routines. Participants' narratives could therefore be interpreted within the wider organisational trajectory through which digital governance had developed.

5.3.2 Data collection at Larwood School

At Larwood School, data collection built on insights gained at Matson Academy while adapting to a different organisational setting. Entering Larwood School as an external researcher, I negotiated access through formal channels by obtaining permission from the Principal and coordinating with a designated senior staff liaison. An initial visit to both the Meadow Park and Oakbridge campuses enabled familiarisation with the physical environment and provided opportunities to introduce myself to staff. This early engagement helped establish trust and clarified that the research was exploratory rather than evaluative.

During the main phase of fieldwork (early 2025), observations and interviews were conducted using procedures broadly comparable to those employed at Matson Academy. Wearing a DBS-cleared visitor lanyard enabled movement between the two sites. I spent extended periods in communal areas, particularly the main staffroom, and attended a departmental meeting. These observations offered insight into the school culture and routines.

Although I did not have the same historical familiarity as at Matson Academy, my background as a teacher and the experience gained during the first case study helped me recognise relevant dynamics and frame appropriate questions. This maintained continuity between the cases while remaining attentive to local context.

Interview sampling sought to mirror the diversity of roles represented in the Matson Academy dataset. With support from the senior staff liaison, participants were recruited from across the organisation, including senior leaders, heads of department, teachers at different career stages and support personnel. A slightly larger number of participants were interviewed at Larwood School in order to capture perspectives from both campuses.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format and addressed themes comparable to those explored at Matson Academy, including digital workload, surveillance practices and experiences of resistance or negotiation. Participants were also invited to reflect on perceived differences between working in an LA-maintained school and in academised contexts. Several interviewees had previous experience of academies and were therefore able to offer comparative reflections that enriched the explanatory potential of the dataset.

Throughout fieldwork at Larwood School, I maintained a reflexive journal documenting how my outsider positioning shaped interactions and interpretation. External status often encouraged participants to explain background context or local terminology, making implicit organisational assumptions more explicit. While unfamiliarity with certain local references occasionally required clarification, it also reduced the risk of taking shared meanings for granted. In some instances participants appeared more willing to discuss frustrations with leadership or policy when speaking to an external researcher perceived as neutral. These accounts were therefore triangulated with documentary materials and observational evidence wherever possible.

The Larwood School fieldwork complements that conducted at Matson Academy by providing a contrasting organisational setting in which similar phenomena could be examined under different governance conditions. This cross-case configuration strengthens the explanatory capacity of the study by allowing identification of patterns that recur across contexts as well as those contingent on specific structural and cultural arrangements.

Organisation case study: Larwood School		
Code	Name (pseudonym)	Job Title (anonymised)
TA	Trevor Ainsley	Teacher (two separate interviews)
SH	Stuart Hemsley	Head of Department
BC	Bethany Crowther	Teacher (Humanities)
RM	Ross Milburn	Head of Year (Pastoral); Teacher
JW	Jonathan Weatherall	Cover Supervisor
DS	Diane Sherwin	Teacher (Sciences)
FN	Freya Norwood	Post-16 academic mentor
EV	Elena Vasile	Cover Supervisor
VL	Victor Lomax	Examinations support role
AF	Alison Farrow	Administration and Resources Manager
NB	Nadia Brooke	Teacher (Modern Languages)
WA	Wendy Askew	Teacher
MO	Michelle Openshaw	Pastoral support manager
HB	Hazel Birtwell	Student wellbeing support role (support staff)
NS	Nina Sedgley	Post-16 academic mentor
IB	Ivy Blakemore	Teacher
ZR	Zoe Renfield	Teacher
OT	Oscar Tremain	Technical support manager

Table 5.3: Larwood School interview participants and their roles.

5.3.3 Documentary analysis

Across both case studies, a range of documentary materials was collected to complement interview and observational data. These comprised internal policy documents, staff guidance materials and routine communications, alongside publicly available sources such as school development plans, Ofsted reports, Multi-Academy Trust newsletters and Local Authority guidance (see Tables 5.4 and 5.5).

Code	Document title	Date
<i>Trust and school governance</i>		
D1	Strategic Plan 2024–2026	March 2026
D2	Scheme of Delegation	September 2024
D3	Trust newsletters / updates	Dec 2023 – May 2024

Code	Document title	Date
D4	Local governing body minutes	Nov 2023 – Apr 2024
D5	Local Authority guidance for MATs	March 2024
<i>School policies</i>		
D6	ICT and Acceptable Use of Mobile Phones Policy	June–July 2024
D7	Behaviour for Learning Policy	January 2024
D8	Assessment and Data Policy	February 2024
D9	Performance Management / Appraisal Policy	November 2023
D10	Online Safety Policy	June 2024
D11	CCTV Policy	July 2025
<i>Trust policies</i>		
D12	Curriculum and Learning – Trust Statement	September 2024
D13	Online Safety – Trust Statement	September 2024
<i>External evaluation</i>		
D14	Ofsted Inspection Report	December 2023
<i>Compliance and data protection</i>		
D15	Safeguarding and data protection policies	February 2024
D16	Data Protection Policy v1	September 2024
D17	GDPR Privacy Notice – Wi-Fi BYOD	Aug–Sept 2024
D18	Privacy Notice for Suppliers of Goods and Services	August 2024
D19	Privacy Notice – Applicants	August 2024
D20	Privacy Notice – Parents (own data)	August 2024
D21	Privacy Notice – Parents (child’s data)	August 2024
D22	Privacy Notice – Pupils	August 2024
D23	Privacy Notice – Trustees, local boards, volunteers	August 2024
D24	Privacy Notice – Workforce	August 2024
<i>Staff guidance and internal communications</i>		
D25	CPD / Professional Development Framework	April 2024
D26	Internal staff guidance (platform use)	May 2024
D27	Staff briefing communications (emails, bulletins)	Nov 2023 – June 2024
<i>Operational documentation</i>		
D28	Timetabling / organisational routines documentation	January 2024

Code	Document title	Date
D29	Staff rooming reports	January 2024
<i>Online safety advisory materials (parental guidance)</i>		
D30	Instagram Parents Guide	June 2024
D31	Internet Matters Gaming Guide to Support Young People	June 2024
D32	Internet Matters Guide: Online Safety for Parents of Children 11–13	June 2024
D33	Internet Matters Parents Age Guide 14+	June 2024
D34	Internet Matters TikTok Guide	June 2024
D35	Internet Matters Tips: Set-up Safe Checklist	June 2024
D36	Kik Parents Guide	June 2024
D37	Omegle Parents Guide	June 2024
D38	Oovoo Parents Guide	June 2024
D39	Snapchat Parents Guide	2024
D40	WhatsApp Parents Guide	2024
D41	YouTube Parents Guide	2024

Table 5.4: Documentary sources from Matson Academy – grouped by category.

The materials presented in Tables 5.4 and 5.5 are organised by document type to reflect the different layers of governance, regulation and day-to-day practice operating within each school. Full metadata for each document, including source, analytical relevance and access date, is provided in Appendix D (Table D1).

Documents were used to situate everyday practices within the formal expectations and regulatory frameworks shaping school routines. They also enabled comparison between participants' accounts and institutional records. When interviewees referred to specific policies, directives or communications, relevant documents were consulted where available to clarify interpretation, timing and scope. This approach anchored retrospective accounts in a documented organisational chronology, strengthening the evidential base of the analysis.

Attention was also directed towards the language through which institutional priorities were articulated. At Matson Academy, policy texts recurrently invoked terms such as 'accountability', 'standards' and 'data-driven practice', signalling a strongly performative framing of staff activity. By contrast, materials from Larwood School, particularly internal communications and guidance, more often emphasised 'support', 'guidance' and 'community' (see Table 5.5). These contrasts

indicate subtle but consequential differences in how professionalism and responsibility are discursively constructed across the two settings.

Code	Document title	Date
<i>School policies</i>		
D1	AI Policy	July 2025
D2	Online Safety Policy	October 2025
D3	Behaviour and Culture Policy	October 2025
D4	Curriculum Policy	October 2024
D5	Attendance Policy	July 2025
D6	Remote Learning Policy	March 2026
D7	Communication Policy	March 2025
<i>Compliance and data protection</i>		
D8	Data Protection Policy	November 2024
D9	Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy	October 2025
D10	Privacy Notice	September 2024
<i>External evaluation</i>		
D11	Ofsted Report	March 2024
<i>Local authority and governance</i>		
D12	Local authority guidance (schools)	2023–2024
D13	Governing body minutes	Nov 2023 – Apr 2024
<i>Staff guidance and internal communications</i>		
D14	CPD / professional development materials	April 2024
D15	Department meeting notes	Nov 2023 – June 2024
D16	Staff briefing communications (emails, bulletins)	Nov 2023 – June 2024
<i>Operational documentation</i>		
D17	Timetabling and organisational routines documentation	January 2024

Table 5.5: Documentary sources from Larwood School – grouped by category

The sources in Table 5.4 and 5.5 are presented in summary form, grouped by document type. Full details of each document (source, analytical relevance and access date) are provided in Appendix D (Table D2).

All documentary materials were stored in a secure SharePoint repository alongside interview transcripts and observational fieldnotes. Rather than constituting a discrete dataset, documentary evidence was integrated into the wider analytical process, allowing for examination of how formal structures, institutional discourses and situated practices align, overlap or come into tension.

5.4 Data analysis approach – five-stage process

Once the qualitative dataset from the two case studies had been assembled, analysis proceeded through a structured multi-stage process aligned with the study's critical realist orientation (Bryman, 2003). The purpose of this strategy was to move gradually from descriptive engagement with the data towards progressively more explanatory forms of analysis. The approach ensured that interpretation remained grounded in participants' accounts while also connecting those accounts to the theoretical resources developed in Chapter 4. These included Bhaskar's (2008a[1975]) emphasis on generative mechanisms and causal powers, Archer's (1995) morphogenetic model of temporally sequenced interaction, and Elder-Vass's (2010, 2012) account of norm circles as mechanisms of normative endorsement. Elements of Foucauldian governmentality (1977, 1991, 2007) were drawn upon selectively as an interpretive resource where they illuminated how power operated through calculative practices, disciplinary visibility and processes of subject formation.

The analysis therefore unfolded through five linked stages. Each stage built on the work of the previous one, moving from data preparation and thematic organisation through retroductive explanation (Fryer, 2022) towards a synthesis integrating morphogenetic and normative analysis (Archer, 2013). The objective was not simply to catalogue how digital platforms were used within the two schools, but to explain why platform governance developed along different trajectories in each context. An overview of the analytical sequence is presented in Figure 5.3.

Stage	Analytical focus	Theoretical grounding	Links to Chapters 6–8
1	Data preparation and familiarisation (Otter.ai transcription, manual checking, anonymisation, initial analytic reflections)	Critical realism (transitive knowledge; rigour through checking)	Verified transcripts; audit trail; early analytic reflections
2	Open coding and thematic consolidation (within-case, then cross-case comparison)	Critical realism (empirical patterns as starting point)	Five core themes per school (Chapters 6 and 7)
3	Thematic event mapping (case-based sequencing of salient episodes)	Archer (temporality; conditioning and sequencing)	Twelve events (Matson Academy) and ten events (Larwood School) (Thematic Event Mapping)
4	Retroductive inference and stratified explanation (moving from themes and events to hypothesised mechanisms across empirical, actual and real)	Bhaskar (generative mechanisms; causal powers; stratification)	Mechanism hypotheses underpinning within-case explanations (Chapters 6 and 7)
5	Morphogenetic and normative synthesis (tracing reproduction and transformation across T ₁ –T ₄ ; mapping norm circle endorsement and sanction dynamics)	Archer (morphogenesis) and Elder-Vass (norm circles)	Within-case morphogenetic narratives and norm circle configurations; cross-case mechanism comparison (Chapter 8)
Interpretive lens Aspects of Foucault's governmentality selectively applied where analytically useful		Foucault (Calculative practices; disciplinary techniques; the formation of subjects)	Targeted interpretive commentary

Figure 5.3: Overview of the five-part methodological process.

5.4.1 Stage 1 – data preparation and familiarisation

The first stage focused on preparing and familiarising myself with the empirical material before any formal coding began. Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai and then manually checked against the recordings to correct transcription errors and ensure that emphasis, tone and contextual references were accurately represented. This verification process formed an important early stage of analytic engagement. Listening repeatedly to recordings while reviewing transcripts helped to surface early points of emphasis, tension and ambiguity within participants' accounts.

All transcripts, fieldnotes and documentary materials were subsequently anonymised. Pseudonyms were applied consistently to individuals, departments and roles, and identifying details were removed or generalised where necessary. This step ensured that the dataset could be analysed systematically while maintaining participant confidentiality.

Familiarisation involved repeated reading of transcripts and fieldnotes alongside the writing of short analytic memos. These memos captured initial observations, emerging contrasts between the two governance contexts and concerns that recurred across participants. At this stage I deliberately

avoided formal coding so that participants' accounts were not prematurely reduced to fixed categories. Nevertheless, recurring patterns began to emerge. For example, teachers repeatedly referred to administrative pressures associated with platform use, including explicit statements about 'increased workload due to data entry'. Other comments hinted at subtler relational shifts in professional trust, sometimes expressed indirectly through remarks implying an 'erosion of trust' linked to intensified monitoring. Such early reflections were treated as provisional prompts for later analysis rather than as settled interpretations.

5.4.2 Stage 2–3 – open coding, thematic consolidation and event mapping

Building on the familiarisation work of Stage 1, the next phase involved systematic open coding of the dataset followed by the consolidation of codes into broader themes and the organisation of those themes into case-based event sequences. These stages marked the transition from immersion in the material towards a more structured analytic organisation, while remaining largely descriptive rather than explanatory.

Interview transcripts, observation notes and documentary materials were examined line by line. Segments relevant to the research questions, or recurring across participants' accounts, were coded as a means of organising and interrogating the data rather than reducing it to discrete variables. While coding is sometimes critiqued within ethnographic traditions for fragmenting context and imposing analytic order, it is used here as a provisional and reflexive device to support systematic engagement with a large and heterogeneous dataset (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014). Coding attended both to participants' explicit statements and to meanings inferred through their accounts, recognising that such interpretation is necessarily mediated by the researcher's theoretical and epistemological positioning.

To address the risk of misrepresentation, codes were developed iteratively and revisited in relation to full transcripts and fieldnotes, preserving the contextual integrity of participants' accounts (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011). Analytic decisions were documented throughout, and emerging interpretations were treated as fallible and open to revision. In line with a critical realist orientation, codes were understood as descriptive abstractions of the empirical domain rather than explanatory claims about underlying mechanisms; explanation was developed at later stages through retroduction (Sayer, 1992; Danermark et al., 2002).

Thematic development was undertaken separately for each school before any formal cross-case comparison occurred, ensuring that thematic structures emerged from within each setting rather than being shaped by the other case. The result was two sets of themes and subthemes reflecting the distinctive experiences of participants within their respective governance contexts.

Alongside this thematic work, clusters of experiences were organised into what I term thematic events. These events represent analytically constructed episodes associated with particular themes. They were treated not simply as descriptive summaries but as manifestations of processes occurring within the actual domain. Some events were directly observed, while others were inferred from participants' accounts. Twelve such events were identified in Matson Academy and ten in Larwood School. Mapping these events clarified the points at which underlying mechanisms might be operating and created a bridge between descriptive thematic analysis and the explanatory work developed in the subsequent stage.

5.4.3 Stage 4 – retroductive inference and stratified explanation

Stage 4 marked the transition from description to explanation. The themes and event sequences developed in the previous stages were now examined through retroductive reasoning. Rather than treating themes as self-explanatory, the analysis asked what underlying conditions would need to exist for the observed patterns to arise.

Retroduction is a central mode of inference within critical realist analysis. As Bhaskar (2008a[1975]) and Danermark et al. (2002) argue, retroductive reasoning involves identifying the generative mechanisms whose causal powers could plausibly produce the phenomena observed. The thematic and event-level patterns identified earlier were therefore treated as possible expressions of deeper structural and cultural forces embedded within particular institutional contexts.

To structure this movement from observation to explanation, each theme–event cluster was examined through a simple analytical sequence:

1. Empirical observation ↓	what participants described or experienced
2. Thematic interpretation ↓	how these accounts were organised through coding and event mapping
3. Retroductive question ↓	what underlying conditions would need to exist for the pattern to arise
4. Explanatory hypothesis	a proposed mechanism capable of generating the observed pattern

Figure 5.4: Stage 4 analytic guide for retroductive and stratified explanation.

This process drew on Bhaskar's stratified ontology. Participants' accounts were treated as expressions of the empirical domain, thematic events were situated within the actual domain and mechanism-based explanations were located within the real domain.

During this stage attention was paid not only to explicit statements but also to silences, contradictions and absences within the data. Bhaskar (2008b) notes that absence itself may signal structural influence. For example, the lack of teacher consultation in decisions about digital platform procurement, or the routine acceptance of intensive monitoring practices, suggested deeper asymmetries in organisational power and knowledge. Such absences were therefore treated as analytically meaningful.

As schools operate as open social systems, retroductive explanations were treated as provisional and revisable. Emerging mechanism hypotheses were continually checked against the empirical material and against the wider case context (Maxwell, 1992; Wiltshire and Ronkainen, 2021). By the conclusion of this stage, descriptive themes had been reframed as hypotheses about generative mechanisms, providing the explanatory foundation for the final stage of analysis.

5.4.4 Stage 5 – morphogenetic and normative synthesis

The final stage integrated the mechanism-based explanations developed in Stage 4 with a temporally sensitive account of organisational change. Here the analysis examined how the inferred mechanisms unfolded historically within each school and how their effects were mediated through interaction and normative endorsement.

Margaret Archer's morphogenetic framework (Archer, 1995; 1998) provides the primary analytical structure. By analytically separating structure, culture and agency and tracing their interaction over time, the model enables explanation of how social arrangements are either reproduced or transformed. Applying this framework allowed the study to examine how digital platform adoption interacted with pre-existing institutional contexts in the two schools (see Figure 5.5).

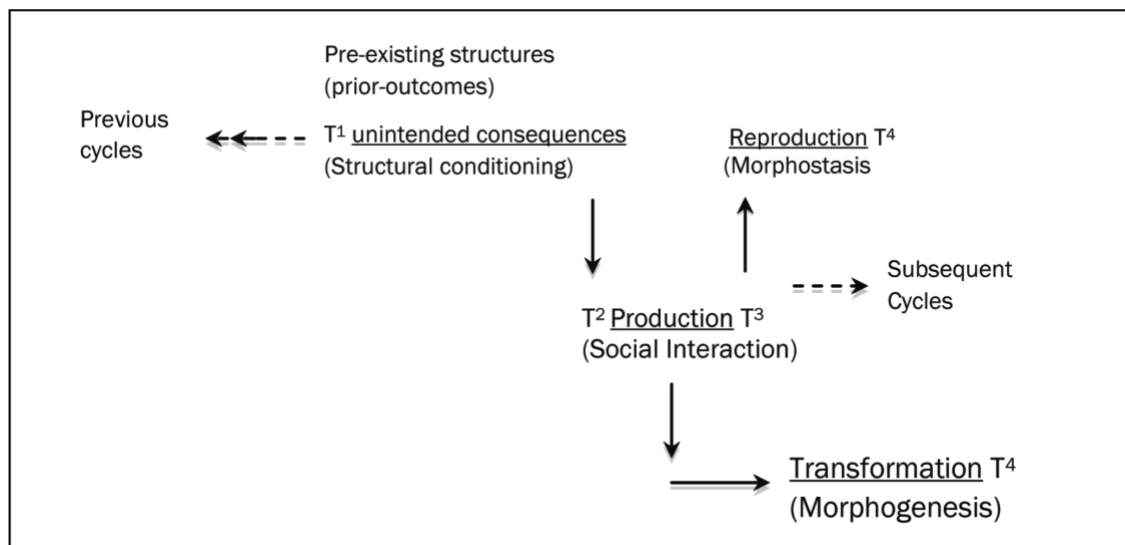


Figure 5.5: Archer's morphogenetic cycle as applied to Stage 5 morphogenetic and normative synthesis (Archer, M. et al., 1998:376).

Morphogenetic analysis was grounded in the event sequences identified earlier. Twelve events were traced in Matson Academy and ten in Larwood School. These events included platform implementations, leadership changes, policy initiatives and organisational decisions shaping digital governance. Each event was interpreted as an instance within the actual domain through which generative mechanisms became activated, contested or stabilised.

Archer's model organises this process through sequential phases:

At T₁, structural and cultural conditions pre-date the actions of individuals. In the present study this included governance arrangements, institutional histories and the cultures already in place. For example, Matson Academy entered the period under investigation with academy status, trust-level oversight and integrated digital systems. Larwood School began from a different position characterised by Local Authority governance, a historically collegial culture and more fragmented digital infrastructures.

The phase T₂–T₃ captures social interaction. Here actors interpret and respond to the conditions inherited at T₁. Teachers, middle leaders and senior managers negotiated or resisted platform-mediated expectations in ways shaped by their professional concerns and commitments.

The final phase, T₄, examines the outcomes of these interactions. In some instances existing arrangements were reproduced, producing morphostasis. In others, interaction generated changes that altered organisational patterns, producing morphogenesis. The analysis therefore examined

whether platform adoption consolidated into stable new routines or whether it remained contested and subject to modification.

Alongside this temporal analysis, Stage 5 incorporated Elder-Vass's (2010, 2012) concept of norm circles. Norm circles provided a mechanism through which expectations about appropriate conduct gained causal force through collective endorsement and sanction. Examining these processes clarified how compliance with platform practices could be stabilised without constant direct supervision and how resistance depended on the density and authority of the groups sustaining alternative norms.

Bringing morphogenetic analysis and norm circle theory together allowed the construction of integrated explanatory narratives for each case. The analysis therefore moved beyond what occurred within each school to explain why comparable digital systems generated different organisational realities. These within-case explanations subsequently formed the basis for cross-case comparison in Chapter 8.

5.4.5 Governmentality as a selectively applied interpretive lens

Although the analysis is anchored in a critical realist explanatory framework, concepts associated with Foucauldian governmentality are drawn upon where they provide additional insight into the micro-practices through which power is enacted. Rather than constituting an independent analytical stage, governmentality functions here as a supplementary interpretive lens, enabling closer attention to the ways in which platform-mediated routines render activity governable, and how such processes contribute to shaping the conduct of teachers in each case.

The analysis draws exclusively on three Foucauldian concepts, calculative practices, disciplinary techniques and subjectivation, reflecting the predominance of findings that indicate recurring patterns of visibility, comparison and self-regulation within the teachers' responses (1977, 1991, 2007).

Digital platforms such as SIMS, Satchel One and Go4Schools were therefore interpreted not simply as administrative tools but as infrastructures through which accountability becomes embedded in everyday routines. Data dashboards and monitoring systems intensify visibility and make aspects of teachers' work more readily open to comparison. In these conditions, teachers may begin to anticipate how their practice will be rendered through digital indicators, adjusting their conduct in response. Morphogenetic analysis at T4 accounts for the outcomes of these processes over time; a governmentality lens helps to clarify how those outcomes take shape within the ordinary, taken-for-granted activity of teachers.

This interpretive lens proved particularly useful in analysing how teachers came to govern their own conduct within platform-mediated environments; what Foucault's later work terms subjectivation (Foucault, 2019). Teachers frequently described settings in which professional judgment remained formally valued yet was increasingly exercised through data-intensive systems that rendered aspects of practice visible and open to comparison; in adapting to these conditions, many came to internalise data-driven expectations and regulate their behaviour in anticipation of judgment rather than in direct response to formal policy or SLT dictates. Governmentality therefore helps to clarify how platform governance could operate through routine administrative practices, and how teachers became active, if not always willing, participants in their own normalisation (Foucault, 1991; Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991).

Importantly, the use of governmentality remained anchored within Bhaskar's (2008a[1975]) stratified ontology metaphor. Foucauldian concepts were confined to the empirical and actual domains, where they informed interpretation of how power was experienced and enacted. Questions of why such practices emerged, and *why* they varied across school contexts, were addressed through retroductive and morphogenetic analysis directed towards underlying generative mechanisms. Governmentality thus operates as an interpretive resource *within*, rather than *alongside*, the morphogenetic explanatory framework.

5.5 Trustworthiness, ethics and reflexivity

Alongside research design and analytic strategy, careful attention was given to ethical practice and to ensuring the trustworthiness of the study's findings. The project followed the University of Essex's formal ethical review procedures (University of Essex, 2024) and adhered to the ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association (2017) throughout. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interview, and confidentiality was maintained during and after the research process. Although the project did not involve direct contact with students or families, my existing Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance, obtained during my prior teaching role, permitted unrestricted access to both school sites. This allowed movement around the premises without the need for staff chaperones and reduced disruption to normal school activity during fieldwork.

As the study examined digital infrastructures within schools, safeguarding anonymity and institutional confidentiality required particular care. School information systems contain extensive personal data, including family contact details, medical records and special educational needs documentation, alongside attendance and behaviour records. While I was issued a visitor identification badge granting general access during site visits, any exposure to confidential digital information, for example when student records appeared on a screen during observation, was limited to what was necessary for the research and occurred only under staff supervision. All research materials, including audio recordings, transcripts and fieldnotes, were stored on a

password-protected computer and backed up to the University of Essex's encrypted cloud storage. Access to raw data was restricted to myself and my supervisory team, in accordance with prior consent obtained from the participating schools. The project also followed the BSA's Ethics Guidelines, including its provisions relating to digital research, which provided a framework for addressing issues of data security and privacy.

Attention was also given to the trustworthiness of the analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Several strategies were used to strengthen the credibility and dependability of the findings. Triangulation was embedded within the design through the use of multiple sources of evidence, including interviews, observations and documentary materials. Perspectives were also compared across hierarchical positions within each school and between the two cases. This allowed emerging interpretations to be examined against differing vantage points and helped assess the consistency of reported experiences. In addition, I conducted limited informal member checking (Koch, 2006). A short summary of preliminary findings was shared with a small number of participants from each school in order to gauge whether my interpretations resonated with their experiences. Although full participant validation of the analysis was not practicable, these exchanges offered a useful sense-check and prompted refinement of several interpretations. Detailed contextual description of the two schools further supports transferability by allowing readers to judge how the findings may relate to other institutional settings.

Reflexivity formed an integral part of the research process. Throughout the study I maintained a research journal and a series of analytic memos in which methodological decisions, emerging interpretations and personal reactions were recorded. These notes provided a space to reflect on how my prior experiences and assumptions might be shaping the research process. Reflexive attention was particularly important given my previous employment at Matson Academy. Familiarity with the setting offered advantages in terms of access and contextual understanding, but it also raised the possibility of unexamined assumptions. Regular reflection, together with discussion with supervisors, helped surface these influences. For example, I noted occasions when I felt overly sympathetic towards the autonomy afforded to Larwood School's teachers as a consequence of their LA status. I treated these reactions as prompts for further scrutiny during analysis, which revealed that this autonomy was also a consequence of management instability.

My positionality as a researcher was therefore acknowledged explicitly. Following Haraway's (1988) argument that knowledge is always situated, the study treated researcher perspective as a feature of the research process rather than an obstacle to be eliminated. Entering the field as a former teacher and as someone with prior experience of one of the schools inevitably shaped interactions with participants and the interpretation of events. Rather than seeking an illusory 'view from nowhere', I sought to remain transparent about this position and attentive to its implications. This meant being open with participants about my professional background when appropriate, while also remaining alert to moments when familiarity might obscure important distinctions or

assumptions. Asking clarifying questions, revisiting documents and discussing interpretations with supervisors were all part of this reflexive process.

Ethical responsibility, methodological rigour and reflexive awareness were therefore treated as interconnected aspects of the research process. By securing access through transparent ethical procedures, employing multiple strategies to strengthen the credibility of the analysis and reflecting critically on my own position within the research, the study aimed to produce findings that are both analytically robust and ethically grounded.

5.6 Reflexive personal insights on accelerated platformisation

This section offers a short autoethnographic reflection on my experience as a teacher at Matson Academy during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its purpose is not to document the pedagogical adaptations of that period, but to situate how I first encountered the rapid embedding of digital platforms as a pervasive organisational infrastructure. That experience shaped my later analytic interest in platform governance, managerial oversight and the mediated character of teacher autonomy.

The reflection is framed through Archer's concept of reflexive agency. Rather than presenting a narrative of personal experience for its own sake, the account illustrates how professional practice was negotiated under conditions of abrupt structural disruption. In particular, it shows how practices initially introduced as temporary responses to crisis quickly stabilised as routine expectations. Observing this process sensitised me to the ways digital platforms participate in the reorganisation of power relations within schools.

From emergency response to routine expectation

When Matson Academy shifted abruptly to remote provision in March 2020, Microsoft Teams became the principal medium through which teaching, meetings and staff communication were conducted. In the immediate context of the pandemic, this transition was experienced as a pragmatic response to unprecedented circumstances. At the same time, it marked my first sustained experience of schooling organised primarily through a digital interface.

Over the following months it became clear that the implications extended beyond the delivery of lessons. Everyday teaching activity increasingly generated digital traces. Lesson materials, assignments, attendance records, behaviour incidents and routine communication were mediated through platform systems and recorded within them. Work that had previously taken place largely within the classroom, or through informal departmental practice, now required formal representation within digital platforms.

At the time I did not interpret this shift as surveillance. It was experienced instead as a gradual expansion of expectations: expectations to upload resources, log activity, record interactions and evidence teaching practices. These expectations were rarely framed as directives. More often they appeared as practical responses to the logistical difficulties of remote schooling. Yet in retrospect this period marked the point at which platform-mediated visibility began to acquire the status of a normal condition of teachers' wider roles.

Consolidation through hybrid schooling

The partial reopening of schools in autumn 2020 accelerated this process. Although pupils returned to classrooms, the platform routines established during remote teaching remained in place and continued to develop. Satchel One was introduced as a shared repository for lesson materials and homework. Posting resources online became an expected practice across subjects. Initially this was justified as a way to support pupils who might be isolating, but it quickly became a generalised expectation.

Existing systems such as Go4Schools and SIMS continued to organise registers, behaviour recording and student data. Rather than replacing earlier systems, the pandemic period produced a denser digital ecology in which multiple platforms operated simultaneously, each carrying its own expectations of use.

The consolidation of these practices was gradual rather than formally announced. When face-to-face teaching resumed, there was a tacit sense that expectations had shifted. Platform use was treated as an ordinary component of professional work. Through routine reminders, departmental conversations and informal references, practices such as uploading materials or logging activity became taken for granted. Over time, the absence of these digital traces became visible in itself. Compliance was therefore understood less as a managerial demand than as part of what counted as responsible professional conduct.

This moment was significant in my own reflexive understanding of my role. I became aware that my work was being reshaped not through explicit instruction but through an emerging normative environment in which digital documentation functioned as a proxy for accountability.

Visibility, standardisation and mediated autonomy

As platform routines stabilised, I became increasingly aware of how these systems reconfigured autonomy. In substantive terms I retained considerable discretion over lesson content and classroom delivery. Yet the form in which teaching activity was represented became progressively standardised.

Homework, feedback and lesson materials were expected to appear within particular systems and formats. Senior leaders could see whether these artefacts existed and when they had been produced. Direct monitoring was rarely necessary. The simple possibility of visibility was enough to orient behaviour. Platform systems also generated automated prompts where expected records were missing, for example when feedback had not been logged for a class.

My response to these conditions was not one of open resistance. Instead, it involved ongoing internal negotiation. I complied with platform expectations because many appeared reasonable and because they quickly became routine. At the same time, I became increasingly conscious of how rapidly these expectations had been normalised and how little explicit discussion had occurred about their implications for workload or managerial reach.

Although the platforms brought clear practical benefits, the coexistence of pragmatic acceptance and analytic unease became an important starting point for the present research. Having taught for two decades, the post-pandemic period felt to me less like a simple technological adjustment than a significant shift in the organisation of professional practice.

Methodological significance

These experiences shaped the research orientation in several ways.

First, they directed my attention towards platforms as infrastructures of governance rather than purely pedagogical tools. My interest shifted from what digital systems might enable in teaching to the ways they structure visibility and organisational oversight.

Second, they highlighted how expectations surrounding platform use become normalised through everyday organisational culture rather than solely through formal policy.

Third, they foregrounded reflexive agency as an important analytic theme. My own experience of navigating compliance, ambivalence and quiet questioning anticipated patterns that later emerged more systematically in the interview material across both case-study schools.

The autoethnographic reflection therefore does not function as empirical evidence in its own right. Instead it provides contextual grounding for the empirical analysis that follows. It clarifies how the research questions developed, why the study focuses on platform governance and power relations, and why a critical realist and morphogenetic framework was adopted to examine the conditions under which digital platforms become embedded in the everyday organisation of school life.

5.7 Methodological limitations and critical reflexivity

This section discusses several methodological challenges encountered during the research and explains how they were addressed. Consistent with the ontological and epistemological commitments of critical realism, these challenges are not treated as threats to validity in a positivist sense. Rather, they form part of the reflexive process through which explanation is developed and evaluated.

5.7.1 Accessing unobservable mechanisms in the ‘domain of the real’

A central difficulty in critical realist research concerns the identification of generative mechanisms that are not directly observable. As Mingers and Standing (2017:176) observe, within a critical realist ontology ‘existence is judged by a causal rather than a perceptual criterion.’ The analysis therefore attends to structural influences that cannot be directly seen but are inferred through their effects. These include, for example, the institutional logics associated with New Public Management (NPM), the normative assumptions embedded in curriculum and accountability policy, and the gradual normalisation of surveillance through educational technologies (Morrell, 2020).

To engage analytically with this domain of the real, I employed retroductive and abductive reasoning (Martella, 2013). Analytic memos were used to reflect systematically on how patterns in the data might indicate deeper structural conditions. For instance, repeated expressions of stress around data entry prompted examination of the policy frameworks and organisational expectations that generated such demands. Elements of discourse analysis assisted in identifying power relations embedded in policy language and organisational routines (Fairclough, 2003). Analysing the wording of a trust policy on data monitoring, for example, allowed inference of the implicit assumptions it carried about teachers’ accountability.

Participant ‘checking-in’, described earlier under trustworthiness (Section 5.5), also helped verify factual interpretation and limit the risk of misrepresentation (Koch, 2006). In addition, I maintained a research journal in which emerging interpretations and assumptions were recorded and reconsidered. This practice reflected Bhaskar’s (2005[1979]) emphasis on explanatory inclusion, remaining open to multiple possible causal influences, and explanatory disinterest, temporarily bracketing personal value judgments during explanation. As Archer (2003) notes, the task of explanation is to identify how mechanisms operate rather than to evaluate their moral status. Throughout the analysis I therefore sought to distinguish clearly between explaining a mechanism, such as the operation of normative pressure, and endorsing or criticising it. Through this combination of strategies, the study aimed to infer the operation of underlying mechanisms in a systematic and theoretically informed way.

5.7.2 Generalisability and case study design

A second challenge concerns the limits of generalisability in qualitative case study research. As Flyvbjerg (2006) and Wynn and Williams (2012) argue, critical realist inquiry prioritises explanatory depth rather than statistical breadth. The two-case design adopted here addresses this issue by selecting cases that differ in theoretically meaningful ways. One school operates within a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) and the other within Local Authority (LA) governance. Both are large state-maintained secondary schools serving socially and culturally diverse communities but exhibiting distinct digital governance cultures (Campbell et al., 2020). The aim was therefore not to represent the full diversity of schools but to examine how similar technologies become embedded under contrasting organisational conditions.

Transferability, rather than statistical generalisation, was supported through contextual detail and theoretical reasoning. Perspectives beyond the two case schools were also incorporated where relevant. For example, an interview with a regional official of the National Education Union (NEU) provided a broader labour perspective on emerging patterns of digital governance. Preparatory work was also undertaken for cross-case teacher–manager focus groups, although these were not ultimately conducted due to scheduling difficulties and pandemic-related constraints. While these elements were limited in scope, they helped situate the cases within a wider context. The intention is therefore that readers can assess how far the findings may resonate with comparable settings, rather than treating them as statistically generalisable claims.

5.7.3 Capturing social complexity and stratified causation

A further challenge arises from the complexity of the phenomena under investigation. Digital platform governance operates across multiple levels, including national policy frameworks, MAT or LA governance structures, school-level leadership strategies and individual teacher responses. Analysing these interacting layers within a stratified ontology required balancing explanatory clarity with recognition of complexity.

The research design addressed this through the combination of interviews, documentary analysis and ethnographically informed observation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Each source illuminated different aspects of the organisational environment. Interviews provided insight into participants' interpretations and professional concerns. Documentary materials revealed the structural and discursive context within which those interpretations were formed. Observational notes then connected both to the material practices through which digital systems were encountered. During analysis, thematic coding helped identify connections between elements that might otherwise appear unrelated. For example, policy discourse around 'data-driven

improvement' was examined alongside spatial reorganisation within the school and participants' descriptions of feeling both monitored and professionally isolated. These relationships were then interpreted through retroductive reasoning and stratified explanation, linking observed patterns to broader structural conditions. In this process, aspects of Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality also proved useful in highlighting how power may operate through the organisation of visibility, measurement and comparison. Combining these perspectives allowed the analysis to address both structural influences and the everyday practices through which they were enacted.

5.7.4 Reflexivity and researcher positionality

A final methodological challenge concerns researcher reflexivity. I entered the research not as an external observer but as a former teacher with prior experience at Matson Academy and familiarity with the regional education context of Larwood School. This position supported access and contextual understanding, while also raising the possibility of partiality or unexamined assumptions.

Reflexivity in this study was treated not as a claim that knowledge is reducible to researcher position, but as a requirement of critical realist inquiry to examine how knowledge is produced through socially situated research. My prior experience as a secondary school teacher, including a sustained period at Matson Academy, formed part of the transitive dimension of knowledge production rather than an external factor separable from the research process. This positioning shaped access and the framing of emerging questions, including sensitivity to school routines, while requiring explicit scrutiny of familiarity and interpretive assumption. The task was therefore not to eliminate positionality, which would be impossible, but to manage it analytically through careful attention to evidence and careful examination of how interpretations were formed.

As discussed in Section 5.5, practical safeguards were adopted to manage this dual positioning. More broadly, reflexivity was treated as a methodological stance rather than a procedural requirement. Within a critical realist framework, knowledge is recognised as situated and mediated through the researcher's position within the social world, and awareness of that position therefore forms part of the explanatory process.

The research design sought to balance insider familiarity and analytical distance. Prior experience at Matson Academy supported a nuanced understanding of informal routines and institutional history. By contrast, my outsider position at Larwood School encouraged participants to articulate local practices and assumptions that might otherwise have remained implicit. This dual vantage point strengthened the comparative analysis of how digital governance was experienced across the two settings (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

Reflexive practice was sustained through journaling, analytic memo writing and regular discussion with supervisors. These practices helped track the development of interpretations and identify assumptions requiring further scrutiny. Following Etherington (2004) and Archer (2007), reflexivity is understood here not simply as a methodological technique but as a human capacity for monitoring one's own reasoning in relation to social context. As Davies (2008:4) puts it, reflexivity involves 'turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference.' Recognising how my prior experience of teaching during the pandemic shaped my initial concerns therefore formed part of the analytic process. The autoethnographic reflection in Section 5.6 makes this connection explicit by showing how personal experience and institutional change intersected in the development of the research.

5.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has set out the methodological architecture of the study. A comparative case-study design was justified on the grounds that contrasting MAT and LA governance settings provide a productive basis for examining how institutional conditions shape the trajectory of platform governance. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, site observation and documentary analysis across both schools, with researcher positionality addressed as a constitutive feature of the inquiry rather than an extraneous variable. Analysis proceeded through a five-stage process designed to move from empirical description towards retroductive and morphogenetic explanation. Bhaskar's stratified ontology, Archer's morphogenetic model and Elder-Vass's norm circles provided the analytical scaffolding at successive stages, with Foucauldian concepts drawn on selectively where they illuminated the micro-practices of platform-mediated governance. With this methodological foundation established, the thesis now turns to the empirical analysis. Chapter 6 examines Matson Academy, where platform governance became particularly embedded and managerial oversight strongly institutionalised, providing the first step in understanding how digital infrastructures and professional norms combine with organisational practices to shape teacher-manager power relations within a MAT context.

6 Findings part one – digital control and teacher agency at Matson Academy

6.1 Introduction

Following the methodological discussion in Chapter 5, this chapter marks the transition from research design to empirical analysis. Having outlined how the study's critical realist framework, supplemented by selected Foucauldian concepts, was operationalised through a comparative case-study design, the focus now turns to the first set of findings. Chapter 6 examines Matson Academy as the initial case through which to explore how digital platforms mediate teacher–manager power relations under particular governance conditions.

The chapter concentrates on the empirical domain of the study. It foregrounds teachers' accounts of everyday experience in order to document how platformisation, organisational restructuring and changing governance arrangements were encountered in daily school life. Consistent with the thesis's critical realist orientation, these experiences are treated as the starting point for explanation rather than its endpoint. Patterns across participants' accounts inform the identification of prominent events in the actual domain, while deeper generative mechanisms are developed through the retroductive analysis presented in Chapters 8 and 9.

The analysis draws on data from Matson Academy, a large secondary academy within a Multi-Academy Trust that underwent significant post-pandemic digital restructuring. As a leading school within its trust and operating under stable senior leadership, Matson Academy adopted multiple digital platforms rapidly after 2020. This expansion occurred alongside a tightening of managerial oversight and the formalisation of everyday organisational routines. The findings are organised around five interconnected themes that capture how these developments were experienced by staff and how they reshaped teacher–manager relations within a high-accountability environment. These themes concern the reconfiguration of staff space and collegial interaction, the centralisation of decision-making, the framing of platform adoption through efficiency narratives, the intensification of surveillance and datafication, and the resulting effects on teacher agency, workload and morale, including compliance and forms of quiet resistance.

The analytical movement remains stratified throughout: beginning with teachers' accounts of experience and gradually working towards an explanation of the organisational conditions that generated those experiences. These include the institutional logics of neoliberal accountability and the consolidation of platform-based governance. Although the chapter foregrounds interview accounts, observational data drawn from departmental meetings, learning walks, staffroom visits

and informal conversations informed the interpretation of several themes, particularly those concerning the everyday enactment of surveillance and the material character of staff space. Where observational evidence shaped a specific interpretation, this is indicated within the thematic sections. The aim is not only to describe developments within Matson Academy but to establish the empirical and conceptual basis for explaining why these dynamics became consolidated within this institutional context.

Matson Academy is a large 11–18 academy within the Elmwood Learning Partnership (ELP) Multi-Academy Trust, educating approximately 1,900 students and serving as a central site within trust-wide development. Leadership continuity formed an important contextual condition. Stephen Ollerton was appointed Principal in 2019, immediately prior to the pandemic, and the period after 2020 was characterised by a stable senior leadership team and a coordinated programme of organisational change. Within the highly centralised governance structure of the trust, this stability enabled school leaders to accelerate digital platform adoption and formalise expectations of uniform practice across the organisation. Multiple systems mediated core institutional functions, including Go4Schools, Satchel One, Microsoft 365 and Teams, and TeamSOS. At the same time, physical staffrooms were closed, relocated or repurposed. Staff widely interpreted these spatial changes as both materially disruptive and symbolically aligned with a more corporate and managerial organisational environment.

Participants frequently described exclusion from key organisational decisions. Consultation regarding spatial changes and platform mandates was reported as limited or absent, while performance monitoring intensified through routine lesson visits, regular reporting cycles and other accountability practices. Some staff acknowledged practical advantages, such as improved communication and easier access to information. Nevertheless, many accounts emphasised feelings of isolation, increased pressure and a deterioration in professional trust. The Matson Academy case therefore provides a concentrated illustration of how a stable Multi-Academy Trust hierarchy can support the rapid consolidation of a standardised regime of digital governance, producing distinctive pressures on everyday teacher practice.

The sections that follow examine these dynamics in detail.

6.2 Theme 1 – loss of communal space and fragmentation of collegiality

One of the most consequential spatio-material changes at Matson Academy concerned the removal, relocation and marginalisation of staff communal spaces. Over time these alterations disrupted previously routine patterns of informal interaction among teachers. During the mid-2010s a new teaching block was constructed without a central staffroom. Participants disagreed over whether this reflected oversight or deliberate design, yet many interpreted it as emblematic

of an emerging managerial ethos in which staff sociability was treated as non-essential. By 2020 the Sixth Form staffroom had been closed and converted into an IT office, leaving the only remaining main staffroom on the third floor of the older building. Across interviews, teachers described these spatial changes as both materially inconvenient and symbolically significant. They contributed to isolation within classrooms and departmental areas and weakened everyday forms of collegial support.

Amy, a recently qualified teacher, described the implications for early-career staff:

'There was no communal space for the team to meet, so everybody was living in their own world and sorted their own lives out, and I was expected to do the same.'

Without an accessible shared space or routine opportunities for informal conversation, Amy felt there was *'no context'* in which to learn from colleagues or seek reassurance. For longer-serving staff, the changes were equally noticeable. Tom recalled that once the new building opened, only *'maybe four or five people'* continued to use the old staffroom, which he described as becoming a *'ghost space'*. The architecture, in effect, designed out casual congregation. As Tom explained, *'those [communal] spaces are really, really important because it makes you feel you're going to a place where it's emotionally satisfying.'* Previously, brief exchanges during breaks allowed staff to *'offload when they were having bad experiences'* and to share successes. Such interactions became increasingly rare.

Several participants moved beyond descriptions of loss to question the politics of the spatial reconfiguration. Peter, a senior teacher with several decades of experience, asked pointedly:

'One of the aspects is – is it a closing down by design, if one were to be cynical about it?... If there were these spaces where people would come together and share their collective experience and perhaps come to a view of something they weren't happy about, then they might have articulated this to management... And if there is no common area for people to come together and talk about grievances and problems, then it doesn't get discussed.'

For Peter, the disappearance of the *'place where we could freely speak'* was closely connected to what he described as *'management that calls itself leadership'*. He linked spatial change to the parallel intensification of workload, including being *'bogged]... down with ... pointless data entry'*, arguing that the combined effect of time pressure and spatial dispersal curtailed opportunities for collective reflection:

'The more you bog people down... the less time they've got to talk to each other about what's going on.'

In this reading, material design, temporal organisation and digital bureaucracy combined to thin out the social conditions under which dissent might emerge. Peter's reference to uniform classroom redesign and the removal of personalisation as *'shades of Mussolini... to be honest'* conveyed the extent to which the environment was experienced as authoritarian rather than merely functional.

Other teachers expressed a similar sense that spatial fragmentation dampened solidarity and normalised compliance. Tom observed that, without a central meeting point:

'you don't get the sharing of the common experience across the institution... you're going to get less opposition.'

He added:

'that sounds a bit conspiratorial, but I'm sure that's a strategy... Why has the central space been taken away?'

When the staffrooms closed, there was, in his words:

'a sort of passive resigned acceptance that there's nothing you can do... it was just imposed... no consultation... it seemed to be just imposed because somebody somewhere thought it was necessary.'

Peter echoed this sentiment succinctly: *'It's surprising what people will tolerate, isn't it.'* No collective challenge emerged; teachers adapted individually.

These accounts point towards a deeper mechanism operating within the domain of the real: the erosion of communal infrastructures as part of a broader governance logic that individualises teachers and weakens collective capacity. Spatial reconfiguration at the organisational level conditioned everyday experiences of isolation and limited voice. Potential collectivities were dispersed before they could consolidate. This interpretation also resonates with a governmentality

perspective in which power operates through the arrangement of environments that thin out horizontal relations and make coordination between actors less likely.

The loss of accessible staffrooms at Matson Academy fractured informal networks of communication and support, leaving many teachers with the sense that *'everyone's just doing the best they can in isolation'*. The reorganisation of physical space functioned as an enacted structure that reshaped daily routines while signalling a shift in organisational priorities away from sustaining social relations and towards technical infrastructures oriented to monitoring and coordination. As one teacher reflected on the conversion of the Sixth Form staffroom:

'They chose network cables over social relations.'

6.3 Theme 2 – managerial centralisation and the erosion of teacher voice

Matson Academy's post-academisation governance was characterised by pronounced centralisation and limited opportunities for teacher input into organisational change within the school. Many participants reported that this pattern intensified following the leadership transition in 2019. Across interviews, teachers described policies and initiatives as being introduced on a fait accompli basis, with little or no consultation on matters that directly affected their work. Amy's comments reflected this view:

'We weren't really given much information... There was no consultation. It was just done.'

The closure and repurposing of staffrooms, discussed in Section 6.2, was frequently cited as one example. Another concerned the imposition of uniform, top-down pedagogical standards and how these were visually reinforced across classrooms. Peter recalled returning after the summer break to find that *'these [instructional] posters were suddenly all there, and the rooms had been painted grey. No consultation, none whatsoever. All top down.'* The abruptness of these changes, and the absence of explanation or dialogue, fostered a sense of powerlessness and deepened staff cynicism about the authenticity of managers' participatory rhetoric.

Several participants suggested that the governance structures which might once have provided some counterweight to senior leadership had been weakened under the Multi-Academy Trust. The board of governors was described as *'toothless dogs...[that would] come into the school every once in a while, but they have no real idea what is going on'*. Peter lamented that they offered little meaningful scrutiny or protection for staff, arguing that Matson Academy's senior leaders had cultivated an environment in which *'dissent was not tolerated'*, alleging that:

'one teacher was constructively dismissed for speaking out'.

Whether or not such claims can be independently verified, their circulation amongst staff is itself significant. It indicates a perceived connection between voicing criticism and personal risk. Tom described becoming increasingly cautious in written communication, self-censoring emails because anything candid *'might be used against me'*. The absence of open critique can be read as an empirical indicator of deeper mechanisms. Silence and caution point towards a low-trust managerial culture in which teachers anticipate negative consequences from speaking openly. This pattern aligns with analyses of neo-managerialism in education that emphasise how performative accountability regimes encourage compliance through the anticipation of exposure and sanction (Ball, 2003; Wilkins, 2017).

Managerial centralisation was also evident in the absence of institutional forums through which staff input might be channelled. Decisions concerning platform procurement, data policies and workload expectations were widely understood to be taken by the Principal, a small group within the Senior Leadership Team and, at times, Trust executives. Teachers experienced these decisions as abrupt and opaque. Such arrangements were consistent with how academy governance more broadly has been characterised in the literature: as affording school leaders considerable autonomy to implement change without the procedural constraints associated with local authority oversight (Gunter, 2012; Ball, 2021).

Importantly, this centralisation was not only perceived by teachers but acknowledged by Matson Academy leaders themselves. Marcus, an Assistant Principal, described how platform data enabled the Senior Leadership Team to intervene directly in departmental practice:

'we [SLT] are able to now go to a Head of Department... [if] your department isn't setting enough homework... we can pick Heads of Department up and challenge [them].'

Matson Academy's academy status afforded leaders considerable autonomy to implement such measures without external approval. Centralisation therefore operated both structurally, through governance arrangements, and operationally, through routine managerial practices.

From teachers' perspectives these arrangements contributed to the sense of being managed *'like a corporate workforce rather than professionals'*. One participant observed that the academy environment felt *'a lot more corporate. You all do the same thing at the same time... led by the CEO – it's very different.'* Such language recurred across accounts. Trust-wide professional development days with identical messaging, as described by Marcus, reinforced expectations of uniformity and synchronisation across schools. While this approach produced organisational

coherence, it also narrowed the space for individual discretion. Deviations in teaching practice, homework frequency or platform use risked being identified and corrected, a dynamic examined further in Section 6.5. As Peter noted wryly, *‘Sometimes it feels like there’s an attempt to micromanage everything.’*

These developments were enabled by the conjunction of stable leadership and MAT governance. The former Principal’s promotion to Trust CEO and the appointment of a successor who shared a commitment to strict accountability and data-driven management created continuity in both vision and practice. Using Archer’s (1995) terminology, the structural and cultural conditions present at T₁ – MAT centralisation and performative accountability norms – conditioned subsequent interaction in ways that favoured the consolidation of hierarchical authority and the marginalisation of teacher voice. Over time these arrangements became normalised. Drawing on Elder-Vass’s (2010) concept of norm circles, Matson Academy’s leadership can be understood as forming a powerful normative grouping that repeatedly endorsed compliance as legitimate conduct while discouraging open challenge. Teachers who aligned with expectations were left undisturbed, whereas those who questioned or resisted were exposed to additional scrutiny or, as Peter alleged, *‘forced out the door’*. Several participants noted that although many staff privately opposed sudden changes or the prospect of further academisation, *‘not a squeak of opposition’* was voiced formally.

Matson Academy’s post-academisation governance was widely experienced as hierarchical and inconducive with teacher voice. The erosion of consultative structures, combined with a climate of perceived risk, produced patterns of self-censorship and acquiescence. These conditions form an important part of the explanatory context for the platform-mediated control mechanisms examined in the sections that follow. In Archerian terms, centralised organisational structures and a performative cultural system created the conditions under which intensive digital governance could take hold. They also help explain why many teachers, lacking collective routes of influence, felt compelled to *‘keep their heads down’* and comply, a pattern revisited in Section 6.6.

6.4 Theme 3 – platform adoption and efficiency discourses

A dominant narrative at Matson Academy framed the rapid expansion of digital platforms as a route to greater efficiency, consistency and, in some cases, workload reduction. This technocratic optimism was articulated most clearly by senior leaders but was also echoed by teachers who experienced practical benefits in their day-to-day work. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a decisive catalyst. Neil, a senior leader, reflected:

‘I don’t think [the speed of platformisation] would ever have happened without the pandemic, because the pandemic showed us that it was possible... The pandemic lit the touch paper.’

Prior to 2020 the school had already begun exploring online alternatives to paper planners and manual homework systems. Remote learning rendered such experimentation unavoidable. Platforms such as Satchel One and Microsoft Teams were adopted rapidly and, once embedded, became routine rather than temporary emergency measures. For the Principal, Stephen Ollerton, the pandemic effectively demonstrated that digital systems could operate across multiple organisational domains, including homework, assessment, record keeping and parent/carer communication. One teacher described this moment as a *'digital sort of revolution in teaching'*, capturing the sense of irreversible change.

Teachers' accounts confirm that platform use did generate tangible efficiencies. Fiona described Satchel One as a *'positive addition in terms of workload'*:

*'Even if [students are] not there, they can see it's been set. It's easier for me to monitor.
... The overall chasing up is much quicker, easier.'*

Automated reminders encouraged more regular homework completion, while parental visibility of submissions *'helps'* reinforce accountability at home. Yvonne, a Head of Department, pointed to similar benefits through the adoption of Smart Revise:

*'Instead of setting a written piece of homework, which can be quite onerous for staff...
we subscribe to Smart Revise... it reduces workload considerably for staff.'*

Self-marking quizzes and automated sharing of student feedback replaced hours of manual marking. Rachel described comparable efficiencies through Microsoft Forms, noting that *'it can self-mark... saving a lot of time'*, although she added the cautious caveat that *'we'll need to monitor [its impact] in future years'*. Even long-established routines such as parent/carer consultation evenings were reframed through the language of efficiency. Marcus contrasted earlier in-person events with online appointments via Teams:

*'You'd get rid of the last parent by quarter to eight... now your last appointment finishes
at 7, and by 7 o'clock you're cooking tea.'*

From his perspective there was *'no way schools are going back'* after experiencing the time savings of virtual formats.

Platforms were also credited with enabling new forms of collaboration. Owen described Teams and shared cloud storage as making departmental work *'more effective'*, allowing *'any member of*

the team’ to access and adapt shared resources. He characterised this as *‘in a way, social’*, insofar as teachers could build upon one another’s materials. Yet he immediately qualified the point:

‘You kind of need to have those relationships before it’s okay to start borrowing people’s stuff or chatting to them [online]. There’re things you wouldn’t say online that you would face to face.’

Digital infrastructures did not substitute for the relational conditions underpinning trust and collegiality. In the absence of strong face-to-face relationships, as discussed in Section 6.2, online sharing risked becoming transactional rather than genuinely collaborative. The efficiencies produced were therefore primarily characterised as technical rather than relational.

A further strand of the efficiency discourse concerned organisational consistency. Leaders such as Yvonne argued that Satchel One ensured that *‘each Year 9 group... gets the same consistency’*, reducing uneven provision between classes. Digital systems rendered previously opaque aspects of practice visible and comparable. Homework frequency, turnaround times and platform usage data could now be monitored centrally, aligning with the familiar managerial maxim that what is measured becomes actionable. Owen observed that *‘Satchel... can say whether kids are doing their homework or not’*, whereas such tasks had previously relied on diaries and teacher memory. Pastoral staff likewise recorded incidents and interventions on Teams, creating searchable audit trails. For managers these data streams generated what was described as *‘confidence at every level of management’*, enabling reports to governors grounded in quantified evidence rather than anecdote. Datafication was therefore framed as strengthening organisational oversight by rendering practice visible and comparable.

Yet teachers’ accounts also revealed a more ambivalent underside to these narratives. Amy described digital systems as a *‘double-edged sword’*. While they could *‘make the workload more manageable’* and occasionally support connection:

‘if [data] is not being sensitively interpreted... it ends up being used as a stick to beat people with’.

Rachel expressed a similar concern, warning that:

‘data can completely undermine... trust if it’s used badly’.

In both cases the difficulty lay in the way numerical indicators detach performance from context. A spreadsheet showing delayed marking or reduced homework frequency cannot capture illness

or other personal circumstances, yet may still be mobilised as evidence of underperformance. Such experiences resonate with critiques of performative governance, in which numerical indicators displace professional judgment and erode trust (Ball, 2003: 219–221).

There were also signs that impression management had become an implicit coping strategy. Some teachers described ensuring that required fields were completed and deadlines met within the system regardless of the pedagogical value of the task, simply to avoid scrutiny. Others alluded to minimal compliance or small-scale ‘*gaming*’ practices, such as entering placeholder data or marks achieved from self-marking multiple-choice assessments, an issue revisited in Section 6.6. The asymmetry of efficiency was often apparent. What enabled a senior leader to generate reports ‘*in five minutes*’ depended upon sustained data entry by classroom teachers. Marcus, responsible for monitoring homework data, acknowledged this tension directly:

‘Accountability has definitely increased, but it’s not necessarily helping relationships.’

Platforms simplified oversight, but potentially at the expense of collegial trust.

Platform adoption at Matson Academy was also shaped by processes of comparison and emulation within the local school sector. Digital systems were not adopted solely for their immediate utility but also as markers of organisational modernisation in a sector competing for students as units of funding. Neil noted that *‘the driver was... they’ve got it [other local schools], we’ve got to get it’*, suggesting that decisions were influenced by competitive positioning as well as by internal efficiency gains. The active marketing of these products by commercial platform providers as workload-reducing solutions and instruments of managerial control was a message that was bound to resonate strongly in an industry characterised by chronic overwork and continual external scrutiny. Yet policy research indicates that marketised EdTech ecosystems may introduce new dependencies and redistribute power towards private actors who determine what can be measured and how (Verger et al., 2017). By 2021, Matson Academy was deeply embedded within a commercial platform ecosystem, effectively outsourcing elements of organisational coordination to commercial software and analytics.

The discourse of digital efficiency at Matson Academy was grounded in genuine and often welcomed practical gains. At the same time these gains were inseparable from intensified datafication and a more audit-oriented culture. Platforms that streamlined communication, marking and reporting also made managerial scrutiny easier, faster and more routine. This dual dynamic forms an important bridge to the next theme, which examines how surveillance and datafication were experienced as mechanisms of control.

6.5 Theme 4 – intensified surveillance and datafication as staff control

The expansion of digital platforms at Matson Academy was closely associated with a heightened environment of monitoring and accountability. Teachers frequently described these conditions through the language of surveillance. This metaphor captured less a literal system of constant observation than a pervasive sense of potential visibility. Everyday teacher activity increasingly left digital traces that could be used for the evaluation of their work.

As Peter remarked in relation to the mandated use of Satchel One:

‘it is a surveillance tool... because you know what everyone’s up to.’

Activities that had previously remained largely confined to the classroom or to individual teacher planners, such as homework setting or the regularity and quality of feedback, were now visible through platform dashboards accessible to multiple levels of management. Assessment data and behaviour records entered into Satchel One similarly became immediately available to line managers and senior leaders. The governing effects described here are not abstract features of ‘datafication’ but are realised through specific platform interfaces. Extracts from Satchel One (Appendix E) illustrate how reporting dashboards render aspects of teachers’ work visible. These interfaces form part of the socio-technical conditions through which surveillance becomes routine and managerial oversight is operationalised. At one all-staff meeting in the school hall, Marcus (senior leader responsible for platform data) delivered a presentation that named and celebrated the departments and subjects exceeding his data benchmarks while, by implication, revealing those below the desired threshold.

Rachel summarised this normative transformation succinctly:

‘there is [now] no longer a paper trail, but a digital trail’, producing what she described as ‘an invisible panopticon where you feel like you’ve been observed the whole time.’

In the analysis that follows, the governing effects of platform monitoring are understood as arising from the interaction of digital infrastructures, organisational expectations and normative pressures; mechanisms operating across the structural and cultural domains identified in Chapter 4. Within this explanatory frame, Foucauldian concepts of disciplinary visibility and calculative practices help to explain how digital metrics and audit trails produce forms of teachers’ work that are observable.

Rachel's spontaneous reference to the *panopticon* is analytically suggestive. The significance of such arrangements lies not in constant direct observation but in the internalisation of the possibility of observation. As Foucault (1977:201) observes, the 'major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce... a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power'. At Matson Academy this permanence was sustained through digital traces that made actions retrievable long after they occurred. Even when managers were not actively inspecting records, teachers often behaved as if they might be.

One illustration concerned the Principal's weekly voice-note briefings to staff. Rachel explained that rumours circulated suggesting the system tracked whether individuals listened to the message and whether it was played to the end:

'There was hearsay... they monitor who plays it and whether they play it to the end. I don't even know if that's possible... but you start becoming hyper-aware... you feel like you're being observed the whole time.'

Although she doubted the technical feasibility of such monitoring, she nevertheless felt obliged to listen to each briefing in full. *'I must play the whole thing... [even though] who has the time to go through and see if people played it the whole length?'* The plausibility of surveillance mattered less than its perceived possibility. Teachers described becoming increasingly vigilant in their behaviour, consistent with Ball's (2003) analysis of performativity, in which professionals continually monitor themselves through the lens of accountability.

Digital monitoring was reinforced by more visible forms of observation. Matson Academy introduced an 'open classrooms' policy alongside daily unannounced learning walks conducted by senior leaders. Marcus described the intention behind this approach:

'Our senior leadership team is in and out of lessons every lesson. We have an "on-tour" rota... you get a far better view of what's going on in the school.'

From a leadership perspective this created a continuous picture of classroom practice. Teachers, however, often experienced it as a form of surveillance. Tom described feeling *'judged on your performance and capabilities alone'*, capturing the sense that one's work was constantly open to evaluation. Several participants explained that this uncertainty encouraged conformity to established routines and discouraged experimentation. Although leaders framed learning walks as supportive, the prevailing interpretation amongst staff was one of monitoring.

Monitoring extended beyond classroom practice. Systems introduced for administrative or security purposes also generated behavioural data. Rachel described being informed that *'every time you use [the old card], we get an alert'* after she used an outdated ID lanyard, prompting the realisation that:

'there are systems I didn't know existed that are monitoring me.'

Similar digital traces were produced through cashless catering systems, internet filtering software and networked printing. Rachel recalled receiving automated notifications relating to her daughter's spending balance and online activity at school, illustrating how monitoring technologies permeated everyday institutional life. The cumulative effect was frequently summarised by staff through references to *'Big Brother'* or comments that *'it's always watching'*.

These monitoring capacities were no passive data repositories; managers worked them into their routines. Marcus explained how platform data enabled him to generate reports rapidly:

'I can run reports in five minutes and send a spreadsheet... I do every department like a health check... how much homework each person's set.'

He described regular meetings with the Principal in which he was questioned about departmental figures, after which he would *'report back to Heads of Department'* regarding staff performance. In one instance he identified a department where a single teacher accounted for ninety per cent of homework set, enabling targeted intervention:

'We can pick Heads of Department up and challenge... see which members of staff are oversetting or undersetting.'

Yvonne described similar practices at departmental level:

'We get a report in... I can look in... if I'm concerned about a particular staff member, I can check the log for their classes...followed by conversations about meeting expectations...such as, make sure you're setting 30 minutes of homework.'

As Rachel summarised:

'[Satchel] not only helps manage how children are accessing homework but also helps you manage other teachers.'

Digital platforms functioned not only as pedagogical tools but as mechanisms of organisational governance. The audit trails they generated could be mobilised to justify praise, intervention or sanction. Marcus noted that during inspections they would present inspectors with live data documents *'so they don't need to come and talk to me, unless there's a problem'*, adding:

'I love data audit trails... it's not just my word that "homework's lovely" – I have figures: this many parents logged on, this many students, this many staff....'

Such statements reflect the wider logic of audit culture in which quantified evidence is privileged over narrative accounts of professional practice (Power, 1997). Through these processes teachers' work became increasingly calculable and comparable.

From the perspective of many teachers the consequences were unsettling. Peter argued that data were sometimes used in ways that felt punitive:

'they start talking about when [staff] were late, or when they left the room to go to the toilet... Where are they getting this from? It's Orwellian... they were using [data] for disciplinary purposes and for the management's grip on power.'

Amy described living with the sense that:

'at any point somebody's going to come down on me and go, "What you haven't done...."'

Notably she had never actually been reprimanded for a missed data entry, yet the expectation of scrutiny remained. She characterised the situation as *'authoritarian drive... mixed in with managerial incompetence'*. The presence of surveillance systems exerted influence even when enforcement was inconsistent.

These developments produced a high-visibility organisational environment in which teachers' activities were routinely used for review. The intensity of monitoring at Matson Academy reflects

the interaction of governance arrangements, leadership practices and the monitoring capacities of digital platforms. The resulting patterns of caution, anxiety and reduced autonomy reported by participants were closely connected to these monitoring practices. In the following section, attention turns to how teachers responded to these conditions and the forms of agency that nevertheless emerged within them.

6.6 Theme 5 – teacher workload, emotional toll and agency in tension

For many of the participants, the tightening of platform-mediated oversight at Matson Academy coincided with, and materially contributed to, an intensification of workload and stress. Across interviews, teachers described a working environment that many felt was difficult to sustain over time, raising concerns about wellbeing, retention and the longer-term viability of existing organisational arrangements. Amy's account was particularly stark:

'It's really hard to maintain. Day in, day out, week in, week out, year in, year out.'

Reflecting on career longevity, she questioned whether it was plausible for someone to enter teaching at twenty-three and *'do it consistently till they retire at 65... I don't think people do.'* Although such reflections resonate with the wider patterns of teachers leaving the profession, Amy linked the pressure directly to the combination of heavy workload and intense monitoring at Matson Academy. Teaching *'approximately 150–200 students'* across multiple classes, she described the continual expectation to perform as *'the adult in the room'* regardless of her own wellbeing:

'It doesn't matter how drained you feel... when the bell goes, you turn up and you do your job... and that's really, really hard to maintain.'

The emotional labour involved in sustaining composure and authority within an environment of constant visibility compounded fatigue.

Workload pressure was reinforced by the structure of the school day. Participants described timetables that left little time for reflection, preparation or interaction with colleagues. Amy highlighted the five-period day, form time and after-school commitments, explaining that *'you didn't have a break time to make those transitions [between classrooms]... you got no thinking time, review time, planning time, before you were launched in front of the next group of students.'* As a relatively new teacher she was frequently required to move between buildings and subject areas. Brief intervals between lessons were often spent *'hang[ing] out in the classroom [she was] about to be in'* because there was insufficient time to walk to the distant staffroom and return.

'Your capacity to have your own rest is limited,' she noted, adding that *'your free times might not overlap with their free times.'* Even where breaks technically existed, they were commonly absorbed by administrative tasks rather than genuine rest. The consequence was prolonged professional isolation:

'you just don't [bother to take a break], and you end up hanging out in the classroom... isolated. You're the only adult in the space, unless someone happens to walk past and say hello.'

Read alongside the spatial changes described in Section 6.2, these experiences illustrate how timetable structures and building design interacted to erode everyday sources of informal support at the very moment when workload and scrutiny were intensifying.

Participants also emphasised the growing encroachment of work into personal life. Rachel articulated a clear boundary claim that implicitly challenged the normalisation of unpaid labour:

'I'm giving you more hours than you're paying me for. I do actually have a life and a family outside of this.'

Planning, data entry and evening communication with parents or colleagues were described as routine expectations rather than exceptional demands. Amy's observation that *'with the best will in the world, you're not reaching retirement'* under such conditions suggests that burnout was experienced less as an individual failing than as a foreseeable outcome of organisational pressure. For her the absence of support was emotionally costly:

'I would regularly go home and cry in the first few months... such was the absence of an effective network of support.'

The earlier erosion of communal spaces and the wider climate of surveillance therefore intersected directly with wellbeing, leaving individuals to absorb stress privately rather than collectively. The themes developed in this chapter thus form a cumulative pattern: spatial fragmentation and managerial centralisation do not simply reshape collegial interaction; they alter the everyday conditions under which emotional labour becomes sustainable.

These pressures raise an important question about agency. If governance at Matson Academy consolidated through intensified monitoring, datafication and reduced professional discretion, what forms of response remained available to teachers? The evidence suggests that overt resistance

was uncommon. Instead, agency tended to appear through more subtle and individualised practices of coping and selective compliance.

One such practice involved small-scale manipulation of data requirements. Some teachers described forms of minimal compliance designed to satisfy visible expectations while limiting additional labour. Marcus referred to colleagues who set homework but:

'not do anything with it... they set the homework [on Satchel] but they don't check it or mark it'.

This distinction highlights a gap between what platforms could confirm and what they could not. Where oversight focused on whether homework had been logged in the system, teachers could meet the measurable requirement without necessarily completing the additional work that would normally follow. Data regimes therefore created incentives to prioritise visible compliance over pedagogical substance. Amy's comment that monitoring combined *'authoritarian drive'* with *'managerial incompetence'* further illustrates this dynamic. Control was strongly felt, yet enforcement capacity did not always match managerial ambition. This could open small spaces for delay, omission or selective engagement within the constant flow of required data.

Alongside these tactical adjustments, teachers sought alternative channels of communication. In the absence of secure communal spaces and in a context where official systems felt visible and risky, some relied on informal messaging networks. Amy noted that *'you can do WhatsApp groups and have those chats outside of [school systems]'*, although she also recognised that such exchanges depended on existing trust and could not easily substitute for everyday face-to-face contact. These informal networks allowed teachers to seek advice, share frustrations and test interpretations of events, even if they remained fragmented and unevenly distributed. The broader culture of caution meant that such conversations rarely translated into organised collective voice. Less experienced teachers in particular expressed uncertainty about who could be trusted, reinforcing the individualised character of coping strategies.

No participants described sustained collective mobilisation through formal grievance procedures or union activity. Instead, accounts pointed towards pragmatic calculations of risk. Where dissent was perceived to carry professional consequences, teachers adjusted their responses accordingly, limiting resistance to actions that preserved plausible deniability. Within Elder-Vass's (2010) framework, the dominant normative environment among teachers appeared to be one of outward compliance coupled with private scepticism rather than organised opposition.

A small number of accounts nonetheless illustrate that agency could also involve reinterpretation and reappropriation. Rachel explained that she did not attach great importance to competitive comparisons generated by platform metrics, noting:

'Last year, I was told X teacher was praised because she sets a lot of homework... I don't tend to worry about that so much. I actually use [Satchel] and find it helpful because I'm quite unorganised as a person.'

In this instance the platform becomes less a symbol of surveillance than a practical tool for personal organisation. Such reframing reduces psychological strain by relocating the meaning of the technology from external control to everyday utility. Rory's enthusiasm for *'AI and big data'* and their potential to produce *'marginal gains'* similarly illustrates how proximity to technical expertise can shape how platforms are experienced. These accounts do not negate the wider pressures but indicate that teachers' orientations towards digital systems were not uniform. Agency could therefore include accommodation and selective alignment as well as resistance.

For some teachers the ultimate form of agency may lie in endurance under constrained conditions or eventual departure. Amy's reflections on career longevity gesture towards this possibility even if individual decisions to leave were not narrated directly as outcomes of Matson Academy's governance arrangements. In Hirschman's (1970) terms, where voice is constrained, exit remains a potential response for protecting professional identity and wellbeing.

Several participants also emphasised that commitment to students continued to shape their actions despite organisational pressures. Teachers often sustained demanding workloads not because they endorsed managerial practices but because they were unwilling to *'let their students down'*. This commitment can be understood as a form of reflexive agency grounded in educational values rather than managerial approval. Even where autonomy narrowed, teachers sought ways to maintain care and professional purpose within the remaining space available to them.

Teacher agency at Matson Academy was constrained but not extinguished. It appeared primarily through subdued and individualised practices: minimal compliance with data regimes, selective engagement with platform requirements, informal communication networks and the reframing of technologies as practical aids. These everyday tactics (de Certeau, 1984) introduced small frictions into an otherwise tightly governed organisational environment, demonstrating that power was never total even where it was deeply embedded in institutional routines and technologies. The following section draws together the chapter's findings and reflects on their theoretical implications.

6.7 Summary of Matson Academy findings

Chapter 6 has examined how Matson Academy, a MAT academy characterised by leadership continuity and strong central authority, underwent an accelerated post-pandemic process of platformisation that reshaped everyday organisational practices and teacher–manager relations. Across the five themes, the findings indicate that digital platforms did not simply extend existing routines. Rather, they became embedded within a broader socio-technical infrastructure and spatio-material reorganisation encompassing governance, space, accountability and organisational culture.

The chapter has focused primarily on the empirical domain, foregrounding teachers' accounts of how these changes were experienced in everyday school life. Figure 6.1 consolidates these experiential patterns by mapping each theme to the recurrent consequences described by participants. The figure therefore summarises how platform governance was encountered. The patterned developments visible across these experiences provide the basis for identifying prominent events at the level of the actual. The specification of deeper generative mechanisms at the level of the real is developed more fully in Chapter 8. Chapter 6 establishes the empirical scaffolding upon which the subsequent explanatory analysis is built.

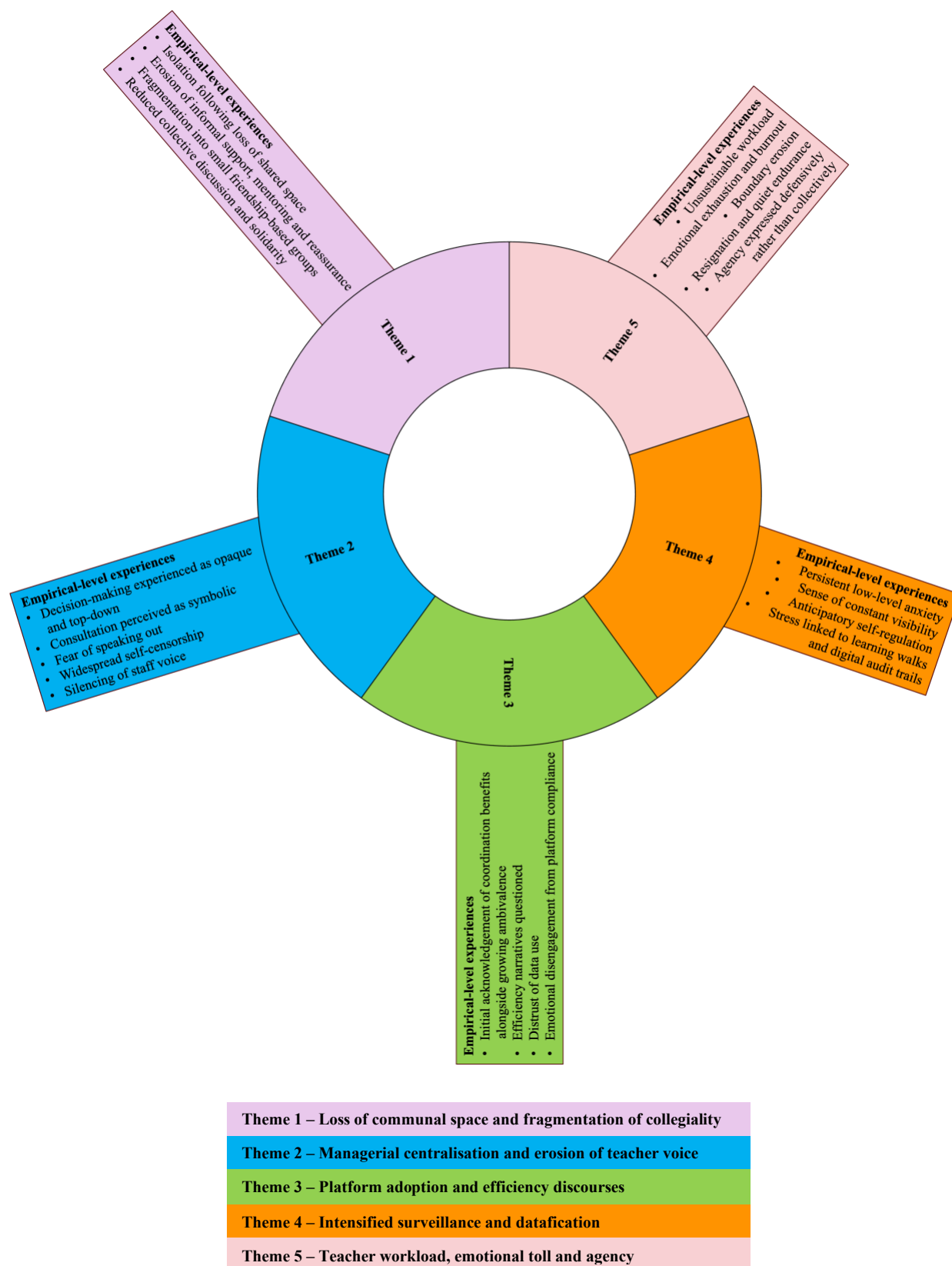


Figure 6.1: Summary of thematic and experiential findings – Matson Academy.

Loss of communal space and fragmentation of collegiality.

The removal, relocation and marginalisation of staff communal spaces at Matson Academy significantly altered the material conditions of teachers' work. As reflected in Theme 1 of Figure 6.1, participants described isolation following the loss of shared space, the erosion of informal support and fragmentation into smaller friendship-based groups. The closure of the Sixth Form staffroom and the peripheral location of the remaining communal area reduced opportunities for everyday peer interaction.

These spatial arrangements conditioned how work was organised and how relationships were sustained. The disappearance of shared spaces narrowed the collective resources available to teachers and weakened informal networks that had previously supported mentoring, discussion and mutual support. Spatio-material reorganisation therefore operated as a causal influence shaping both organisational practices and everyday experience.

Managerial centralisation and the erosion of teacher voice

Theme 2 summarises participants' accounts of opaque and top-down decision-making, symbolic consultation and widespread self-censorship. Governance at Matson Academy was widely perceived as centralised, with major decisions presented as settled outcomes rather than open propositions.

Leadership continuity, MAT autonomy and entrenched performative norms combined to produce a context in which policy, pedagogy and platform use were directed from the centre and enforced through hierarchical lines. Under these conditions digital governance became normalised with little overt challenge. Empirically, this appeared as the silencing of staff voice and routine self-regulation.

Platform adoption and efficiency discourses

Theme 3 captures the ambivalent position of digital platforms. Participants recognised practical efficiencies, including streamlined communication, faster feedback and the convenience of online parents' evenings. At the same time, Figure 6.1 highlights growing ambivalence, distrust of data use and emotional disengagement from platform compliance.

Platforms therefore operated simultaneously as labour-saving devices and as infrastructures of expanded visibility. Tasks previously enacted locally became centrally auditable and comparable. Apparent efficiencies were inseparable from an expansion of managerial capacity to monitor, evaluate and intervene, reshaping what counted as legitimate and recognisable work.

Intensified surveillance and datafication

Theme 4 foregrounds persistent low-level anxiety, a sense of constant visibility and anticipatory self-regulation associated with learning walks and digital audit trails. Matson Academy developed an integrated monitoring environment combining platform analytics, digital logs, ID systems and routine classroom observation.

Teachers frequently described acting as though they might always be observed, even when direct monitoring was intermittent. Surveillance was therefore experienced less as a series of discrete interventions than as an ambient condition of work. Its effects derived not from technology alone but from the way digital tools were embedded within a tightly governed organisational environment.

Teacher workload, emotional toll and agency

Theme 5 emphasises unsustainable workload, emotional exhaustion, blurred personal boundaries and defensive forms of agency. The convergence of spatial fragmentation, centralised authority and surveillance generated significant strain.

Agency was not absent but reconfigured. Teachers described selective compliance, small-scale data ‘gaming’, informal back-channel communication and the reinterpretation of platforms as practical organisational aids. Overt collective resistance was rare, reflecting a context in which perceived risks outweighed the prospects of change. Agency therefore appeared largely in individualised and tactical forms.

Application to research questions

Figure 6.1 synthesises the empirical surface of platform governance at Matson Academy. Across the five themes a coherent organisational configuration becomes visible: spatio-material fragmentation limited collective solidarity; centralised governance narrowed voice; efficiency discourses normalised data production; surveillance encouraged anticipatory compliance; workload pressures individualised agency.

These developments point towards a predominantly morphostatic trajectory. Pre-existing structural and cultural conditions were reinforced rather than transformed, while digital infrastructures became closely aligned with managerial authority. Chapter 6 has therefore established how platform power was experienced and patterned within Matson Academy. The task of specifying the generative mechanisms underpinning these patterns is developed in Chapter 8.

The findings speak directly to the study's research questions:

- **RQ1 (Oversight and autonomy):** Digital platforms at Matson Academy restructured managerial oversight, substantially constraining teacher discretion through surveillance and data-driven monitoring.
- **RQ2 (Mechanisms and governance models):** MAT autonomy, leadership continuity and performative accountability norms operated as generative mechanisms embedding platforms within governance structures.
- **RQ3 (Interpretation, negotiation and resistance):** Teachers predominantly engaged in covert, individualised coping and resistance rather than overt collective challenge.

The following chapter turns to the second case school, where different governance conditions shaped a distinct trajectory of platform adoption and organisational change.

7 Findings part two – platform instability and teacher agency at Larwood School

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the second empirical case study, examining how digital platformisation unfolded at Larwood School, a Local Authority-maintained secondary school. Drawing on interview data and documentary sources, it explores how platform-based tools were adopted, negotiated and, at times, resisted within an institutional setting shaped by leadership turnover, weaker coordination and uneven patterns of platform use.

Like the preceding chapter, the analysis operates primarily within the empirical domain, foregrounding teachers' accounts of digital adoption, organisational change and governance. These accounts reveal recurrent patterns within the case. The identification of prominent organisational events and the specification of deeper generative mechanisms are developed more fully through the cross-case retroductive and morphogenetic analysis presented in Chapter 8.

The chapter examines how digital platforms were adopted, enforced and experienced at Larwood School, tracing how dynamics of managerial oversight, teacher agency and resistance, spatio-material arrangements and data practices took a particular form within this governance context. The analysis is organised into six sections derived from inductive coding of the Larwood School dataset and refined through the critical realist analytical stages outlined in Chapter 5. Throughout, the interpretation remains informed by the thesis's integrated framework combining critical realist stratification, Archerian reflexivity and selected insights from norm circles and governmentality.

The analysis situates Larwood School's platform practices within the structural and normative conditions identified in Chapter 4. Where relevant, Foucauldian concepts of disciplinary visibility and calculative practices are drawn on to illuminate how digital systems render aspects of teachers' work observable and comparable, without displacing the critical realist explanatory logic that anchors the discussion.

The chapter moves from wider organisational conditions towards their expression in everyday school practice. The opening section examines the post-pandemic context and its implications for digital adoption at Larwood School, showing a trajectory shaped by leadership turnover and partial consolidation rather than coordinated transformation. Subsequent sections examine platform

governance as a pattern of weak oversight, drift and selective tool use, alongside the implications for workload and data practices. Attention then turns to the spatio-material environment, focusing on the continued presence of communal staff spaces and the ways these sustained collegial norms and informal support. The chapter concludes by examining teacher agency, showing how staff interpreted digital demands and, in some cases, resisted platform expectations more openly within an expanding but inconsistently enforced data regime.

Adopting a critical realist explanatory orientation, each section identifies structural, cultural and agential conditions that help account for Larwood School's distinctive trajectory. Leadership instability and Local Authority procedural constraints appear to have contributed to looser enforcement, while the persistence of staffroom culture sustained collegial interaction and, at times, collective voice. In keeping with the thesis's rejection of technological or structural determinism, the analysis foregrounds teacher reflexivity and agency (Archer, 2007), tracing how staff navigated digital demands through selective compliance, negotiation and occasional resistance.

Overall, the chapter provides an empirically grounded account of platform governance and teacher agency at Larwood School. It shows how organisational inertia, uneven leadership and the persistence of collegial infrastructures shaped a more negotiated and inconsistent form of digital control. As in Chapter 6, interview accounts provide the primary empirical material, though observational evidence from site visits, staffroom observation and departmental meetings has informed the interpretive framing of each theme, particularly those addressing communal space and collective resistance. These findings prepare the ground for Chapter 8's cross-case analysis, where the generative mechanisms shaping differences in oversight, autonomy and resistance across governance contexts are examined through retroductive explanation and morphogenetic synthesis.

7.2 Theme 1 – leadership instability and post-pandemic managerial restructuring

This section examines the post-pandemic organisational trajectory of Larwood School, focusing on leadership instability as a key contextual condition shaping digital platformisation, managerial oversight and teacher agency. At Larwood School the pandemic acted as a catalyst for rapid digital adoption. However, the subsequent consolidation of platforms unfolded in a way shaped less by strategic direction than by successive leadership transitions, with initiatives introduced, revised or abandoned before routines could take hold.

During lockdowns, digital platforms became essential tools for sustaining teaching and communication. At Larwood School, Google Classroom and related systems were rapidly adopted to support remote provision. Yet the momentum generated during this period did not translate into

a unified strategy once face-to-face teaching resumed. A recurring explanation within the Larwood School data is that leadership turnover after 2020 disrupted organisational continuity at precisely the moment when consolidation might otherwise have occurred. Initiatives were introduced, revised or abandoned, often without sustained reinforcement or resourcing. As a result, digital systems remained partially embedded rather than becoming central organising infrastructures.

Leadership change at Larwood School was both rapid and successive. Eileen Shore, headteacher for sixteen years (2005–2021), retired and was followed by Sally Quigley (pseudonym; 2021–2023), before Ruth Calloway’s appointment, initially on an interim basis, in 2023; the post was not made permanent until 2024. This extended period without a permanent headteacher further disrupted strategic direction. Alison, an Admin and Resources Manager, reflected on this transition:

‘We had a very long-standing Headteacher... and that was a stable period of time... But I think on the same note, what maybe happened is that some of that stability also was a barrier to change in some respects. But then I think what we’ve done – the opposite thing – is, since that Head left, we’ve gone through now two Headteachers and a period of an interim situation with no Headteacher. And there’s been quite a lot of change [over the past three years] as a result of that. I think that’s been an interesting thing for the school to get used to... And I’m quite sure there’s more change to happen.’

Alison’s account captures a central tension in the Larwood School narrative. Long-standing leadership had provided continuity but also produced a degree of institutional inertia that slowed adaptation. The subsequent shift from stability to volatility, however, did not generate coherent innovation. Instead, it created uncertainty and discontinuity. Staff described the period after 2021 as one of repeated adjustment in which expectations changed before earlier initiatives had become embedded. Under these conditions new systems were often treated as provisional rather than durable.

Jonathan, a cover supervisor, described the practical implications of this turbulence in relation to digital platforms:

‘When I started, the headteacher had been here for over 20 years, and the school was very stable. Perhaps too stable. Then we had two different heads in quick succession. One brought in Class Charts, and we were trained up on that. It lasted maybe 18 months, and then we had to go back to Go4Schools. By that time, everybody had forgotten how to use it, so we had to go through the whole relearning process again.’

Jonathan's observation that the school had been '*very stable. Perhaps too stable*' echoes Alison's ambivalence. While long-term continuity initially generated organisational coherence, it also limited responsiveness to new developments. More importantly for the platform trajectory, his account illustrates how rapid leadership change undermined the consolidation of routines. Training, adaptation and habitual use require time and repetition. When platforms were replaced or abandoned, teachers learned that investment in new systems might soon be rendered redundant. This weakened confidence in the permanence of digital mandates and reduced the incentive to commit fully to their use.

Viewed through Archer's morphogenetic framework, the conditioning context at T₁ was shaped by long-standing leadership and established organisational routines. The post-pandemic interaction phase (T₂–T₃) was marked by instability, with successive leaders introducing differing priorities and initiatives. At T₄, rather than consolidating into a stable new organisational form, digital practices remained unsettled. Earlier ways of working persisted alongside partially implemented systems. Larwood School's trajectory therefore resembles a form of morphostatic drift in which technological change occurs without producing a coherent reorganisation of everyday practice.

Leadership instability thus functions as a structural condition shaping the possibilities of platform governance. In the absence of sustained leadership vision and enforcement capacity, platform initiatives were often experienced as provisional and unevenly applied. This altered the balance of power in everyday practice. Without a stable leadership-driven norm circle consistently endorsing platform use as obligatory, teachers retained greater latitude to interpret expectations, prioritise according to professional judgment and, at times, disengage from platform mandates with limited consequence.²⁰

7.3 Theme 2 – governance structures and the role of local authority oversight

Alongside leadership instability, Larwood School's status as a Local Authority-maintained school constitutes a further structural condition shaping its platform trajectory. Operating within a governance framework that constrains procurement, policy alignment and the integration of digital systems, the school faces limitations on what forms of digital governance can emerge and how coherently platforms can be embedded within everyday practice.

²⁰ This analysis foreshadows broader cross-case patterns: Chapter 8 will further compare how leadership continuity versus instability acted as generative mechanisms producing divergent platform governance outcomes in the two schools.)

A recurrent issue in the Larwood School data concerns the requirement to maintain compatibility with LA-wide systems for finance, payroll, human resources and data management. Alison explained:

'Unlike academies that can pick their own finance and payroll systems, we have to make sure everything ties into LA systems.'

This obligation restricts the school's ability to select platforms solely on the basis of local pedagogical or operational suitability. Digital tools must first satisfy external compatibility requirements, even where alternative systems might better support a large and organisationally complex secondary school.

Alison also highlighted how Larwood School's organisational configuration interacted with these constraints:

'We're a slight anomaly in that we're a split site secondary, and that's caused, you know, some differences and nuances... being with the LA has meant that some of the other software out there [better suited for complex schools] is more akin to private schools... we lack the freedom to pursue those.'

Larwood School's operational requirements therefore exceed what is easily accommodated within LA-standard systems, yet the school lacks the autonomy to pursue alternatives commonly used by more independent institutions. Platform adoption is consequently shaped less by pedagogical optimisation than by what remains permissible within LA infrastructures. External compatibility functions as a primary selection criterion. This helps explain why digital systems at Larwood School were frequently described as partial, delayed or compromised in their implementation.

Participants did not frame Local Authority oversight solely as a limitation. On the contrary, staff repeatedly emphasised the protections associated with LA governance, and none expressed a desire for academisation. Trevor summarised this perspective:

'They can't mess with the times, they can't mess with the curriculum, they can't mess with teachers' pay... It's untouchable.'

These protections were understood to safeguard core aspects of professional work, including national pay scales, contractual arrangements and curriculum structures. LA governance therefore functioned as a stabilising framework that preserved a degree of predictability for teachers even

during periods of leadership turnover. The same institutional structure that constrained rapid digital experimentation also limited the scope for unilateral managerial restructuring of working conditions.

Viewed through Archer's (1995) analytical framework, Larwood School's governance arrangements exhibit a dual character. They enable professional security while constraining the school's capacity to implement a coherent, locally tailored digital strategy.

The combined effect of Local Authority oversight and leadership instability is a loosely coupled digital environment. Platforms are present but their status often remains provisional. Policies exist but enforcement varies. Teacher practice consequently develops in uneven ways across departments and individuals. This organisational pattern differs markedly from the tightly integrated and centrally enforced system described in Chapter 6.

Larwood School's governance structure shaped platform adoption in ways that differ from schools operating under greater institutional autonomy. The structural conditions examined here – compatibility obligations, constrained procurement and the dual character of LA oversight – form part of the explanatory context for the distinctive patterns of surveillance, datafication and teacher agency examined in the sections that follow. Their full significance in relation to contrasting governance conditions is explored in Chapter 8.

7.4 Theme 3 – weak surveillance and datafication

A notable feature of platform governance at Larwood School is the low intensity of oversight. No coherent, school-wide surveillance framework consistently tracks classroom practice or platform compliance, and the extent of monitoring varies across sites and leaders. Digital systems are present but their connection to routine performance management remains weak.

Trevor, who taught at Larwood School's Sixth Form campus, described the near absence of lesson observation:

'You get over here [to the Oakbridge Sixth Form], and it's completely ignored – [the standardised lesson structures]. They claim that they're going to be in the lessons and supporting. So, the Deputy Head of Sixth Form came round in the first week and came in for about 30 seconds, and I haven't had anyone visit me in my lessons since.'

This account illustrates a form of symbolic rather than sustained observation. Initial gestures towards visibility are not followed by routine presence, and they therefore lack the cumulative force necessary to reshape everyday conduct. Observation at Larwood School remains sporadic and low-stakes.

The absence of pervasive monitoring has clear implications for professional autonomy. Teachers at Larwood School generally reported little day-to-day interference in classroom practice. Many described feeling trusted and comparatively unpressured. Even so, this looser environment weakens mechanisms for consistency and coordinated intervention. What appears as organisational slack in one institutional setting can equally be understood as professional latitude.

Weak surveillance also makes it possible for teachers to bypass or substitute mandated platforms with minimal risk. Trevor offered a candid example:

'We're meant to just be using Go4Schools for recording as a mark book or setting work. But we don't. We just use Google Classroom because we prefer it. And that happens quite a lot.'

Here non-compliance is neither covert nor exceptional. Teachers collectively rely on tools they consider more functional or pedagogically useful, even where these diverge from formal policy. Crucially, this behaviour persists because it is rarely challenged. Resistance therefore need not be concealed; it can remain casual and overt.

This pattern complicates simplistic accounts of teachers either embracing or rejecting digital technology. Staff at Larwood School do not oppose platforms as such. Many use Google Classroom and other digital tools extensively. What they resist are systems perceived as inefficient, temporary or misaligned with their practice. The capacity to choose between platforms arises precisely because leadership has not entrenched a single system through sustained monitoring or high-stakes accountability.

From a critical realist perspective, the weak enforcement of platform mandates constitutes a structural condition that enables an emergent cultural pattern of pragmatic selectivity. Teachers prioritise systems that support their work and quietly disregard those that do not. Compliance therefore depends not simply on formal policy but on the broader institutional capacity to sustain monitoring and reinforcement. In this loosely coupled governance environment, technology use remains mediated by professional judgment rather than determined by the properties of software.

Datafication at Larwood School is similarly weakly integrated into everyday governance. Teachers reported entering attendance records, assessment marks and other required data largely to meet

basic Local Authority or inspection expectations. However, few described a sense that these data were systematically analysed or incorporated into routine performance management. Several participants characterised data entry as a routine administrative task rather than a mechanism of organisational control. As one teacher explained, *'you do the registers and input grades when asked, but nothing ever comes of it unless something's very wrong, so it's hard to care much.'*

This pattern reflects a decoupling of data from organisational consequence (Power, 1997). Metrics are collected but do not consistently shape decision-making or professional evaluation. The absence of strong feedback loops limits the performative force of data and reduces its capacity to structure behaviour through anticipatory discipline. Over time a shared scepticism emerges in which data entry is completed because it is required, not because it meaningfully informs teaching practice.

Larwood School exhibits a weakly institutionalised regime of surveillance and datafication. Platforms and metrics exist, yet they remain only loosely connected to managerial authority. Teachers enjoy greater day-to-day autonomy and encounter less affective pressure, although this is accompanied by uneven practice and limited strategic coordination. The next section examines how the spatio-material environment at Larwood School shaped the social conditions of teachers' work.

7.5 Theme 4 – spatio-material conditions: retained communal spaces

A significant feature of Larwood School's organisational environment is the retention of accessible and widely used communal staff spaces. The school maintains large, centrally positioned staffrooms on both sites. These spaces function as everyday hubs for social interaction, sharing ideas and experiences, and emotional support, and are treated as an ordinary, and important, part of school life.

Alison described the provision as follows:

'There is a central staffroom that everybody uses for this [Sixth Form] site. And then over on the other side, there is a much bigger staffroom in the main school building, and that's got some computers in it for people to work at if they want to. And that is, you know, tea and coffee. One of the things that's good [for bringing staff together] is free tea and coffee.'

Her account points not simply to the existence of a room but to material infrastructure designed to encourage congregation. Computers, refreshments, comfortable chairs and a central location make the staffroom both practical and attractive as a place to spend time. Leadership appeared to recognise the value of shared space as a resource for morale and cohesion.

Collegiality is also reinforced through shared rituals that cut across departmental boundaries. A prominent example is the weekly *'Faculty Feast'* or *'Cake Friday'*, during which a different department each week brings cakes to the main staffroom for all staff. Alison explained: *'That's what we're trying to do with the Cake Fridays – just to bring people back together.'* Even the practical challenges of operating across two sites are addressed, with cakes transported between campuses so that staff are not excluded. Nina confirmed this inclusive approach: *'There are still communication routes with [staff working across both campuses]... we make sure to involve those staff [in the communal activities].'* These gatherings were observed as lively and well attended, characterised by humour, informal conversation and friendly banter.

Elena emphasised how routine and valued these interactions were:

'Yes, it is well used. We are all here... that's our gathering place, and that's where we are interacting with each other... People have duties, like in every school, but we've got time to interact with each other. It's not that we don't... We prefer this.'

Her emphasis on preference is notable. Despite the pressures of extra-curricular duties and workload, staff actively choose to congregate. Communal space remains embedded in the ordinary rhythm of the working day.

Collegial norms are reinforced not only through shared spaces but also through expectations about visibility and accessibility. Rachel, a senior member of staff, explained:

'I come down here for my lunch. I have an office where I am quite a lot of my time, but I'm not encouraged to stay in my office.'

This gentle discouragement of withdrawal signals an organisational orientation towards presence and informal interaction. Rather than isolation within private offices, the culture of the school treats time spent in shared spaces as a normal and legitimate aspect of school community. Rachel also noted that the HR officer regularly visits the Sixth Form site in person and makes herself available to staff, illustrating a mode of institutional accessibility grounded in direct human contact.

Alison offered a broader reflection on school design trends that situates these differences within a wider shift in educational architecture:

'If you look at a new build house, there's never a dining room... it's not seen as an essential space. And I think new schools are that similar kind of thing. Actually, a staffroom is not seen as an essential space, therefore it doesn't have to exist... we're forgetting that importance of a social space and a coming together of people.'

Her analogy captures a wider tendency in contemporary institutional design, where efficiency, functionalism and monitoring-oriented layouts displace spaces intended for unstructured social interaction. The continued presence of staffrooms at Larwood School therefore represents a departure from this trend, one with tangible consequences for a socialised organisational culture.

Analytically, these communal spaces function as more than practical amenities. They operate as sites for the reproduction of collegial norms. Through repeated co-presence, informal conversation and shared rituals, expectations of mutual support, openness and reciprocity are continually enacted and reinforced. In Elder-Vass's (2010) terms, Larwood School sustains a norm circle oriented towards collegiality and staff solidarity. This configuration carries causal consequences. It supports morale, fosters trust and provides a social basis for collective sense-making about policy and platform initiatives. I analyse this point in more detail in Chapter 9.

The preservation of communal space constitutes a cultural emergent property with real causal powers (Archer, 1995). At the level of the real, these spaces and the norms associated with them condition patterns of interaction. At the level of the actual, this is expressed through regular cross-departmental collaboration, shared problem-solving and occasional coordinated responses to problematic initiatives. At the empirical level, teachers report feeling supported, connected and more confident in articulating concerns.

The relational infrastructure sustained by Larwood School's communal spaces creates conditions in which teachers are less isolated and better positioned to act collectively. The next section examines how these collegial conditions shape teacher agency in relation to digital platforms, including forms of resistance that are more visible and less individualised than those examined elsewhere in the study.

7.6 Theme 5 – platform instability, change fatigue and teacher resistance

This section examines how repeated digital platform transitions, alongside weakly consolidated digital governance at Larwood School, generated staff frustration and distinctive forms of

disengagement and resistance. Shifting policies and uneven oversight undermined the authority of platform directives, while normalising non-compliance. Rather than producing covert workarounds under conditions of close monitoring, the Larwood School context enabled more open, and at times casual, forms of resistance, which occasionally coalesced into pockets of collective opposition.

A central analytical question concerns the nature of agency under these conditions. Does instability expand teacher autonomy, or does it instead cultivate longer-term disengagement from institutional initiatives? The evidence points to a layered pattern in which teachers exercise agency through overt disengagement, selective engagement with preferred platform functions, and periodic forms of collective pushback. These practices appear shaped less by principled opposition to technology than by pragmatic responses to organisational volatility and a perceived lack of strategic coherence.

7.6.1 Passive non-compliance and platform preference

One of the clearest indicators of teacher agency at Larwood School is the routine disregard of mandated platforms, not just functions, in favour of preferred alternatives. Teachers frequently ignore official systems altogether without concealment or fear of sanction. Trevor described this plainly:

'We're meant to just be using Go4Schools for recording as a mark book or setting work. But we don't. We just use Google Classroom because we prefer it. And that happens quite a lot.'

Non-compliance here is not exceptional but normalised. The collective nature of the practice, together with the absence of managerial follow-up, indicates a significant gap between formal policy and enacted practice.

This pattern does not represent an outright rejection of digital technology per se. Teachers make extensive use of Google Classroom and other tools they regard as reliable and pedagogically useful. What they resist are imposed systems perceived as cumbersome, unreliable or temporary. Trevor's additional comment, *'That's rubbish [Go4Schools]. We much prefer Google Classroom... No one ever says anything about it,'* illustrates how weak enforcement effectively legitimises disengagement. Where leadership does not insist on compliance, staff infer that policy is provisional and open to reinterpretation.

From a theoretical perspective, this destabilises the assumption that standardisation alone produces conformity. The authority of platform mandates depends not only on formal rules but on cultural legitimacy, leadership consistency and everyday reinforcement. At Larwood School these conditions are fragile. Informal norms routinely override official directives, and resistance becomes casual and habitual rather than strategic or concealed.

7.6.2 Resistance through platform instability and ‘change fatigue’

A major driver of disengagement at Larwood School is the rapid succession of platform changes. Repeated transitions eroded staff confidence in the durability of any particular system and fostered what participants described as change fatigue. Bethany summarised this experience:

‘We’ve gone from Go4Schools to Class Charts, then back to Go4Schools, and now I think it’s going to change to Arbor. There’s been a lot of changing systems over a very short period... Until you know that a system is bedded in, I think people don’t use the platforms as efficiently as they could.’

Her account highlights how instability discourages investment. Learning a platform, adapting resources and developing efficient routines requires time. When systems appear temporary, such investment seems understandably irrational. Teachers therefore adopt a stance of minimal engagement, using systems only when necessary.

Jonathan echoed this sentiment:

‘We’ve changed our base platform three times in three years by the time we move to Arbor, and that means shaking everything up again.’

He added:

‘We’re not told the specifics – we’re just left to cope with it whenever it comes in. That kind of uncertainty limits how much we actually use the platforms. You use them for the things you have to – registers, behaviour, some communication – and then you try and avoid them as much as possible otherwise.’

Here resistance takes the form of withdrawal rather than subversion. Teachers disengage from systems they do not expect to last. Without a settled digital infrastructure, teachers respond not with tactical manoeuvring but with limited engagement.

7.6.3 Collective vs individual resistance and leadership responses

The scale at which resistance occurs also matters. In Larwood School collective dissatisfaction has, at times, produced concrete policy reversals, whereas individual concerns often remain unresolved unless they align with wider organisational sentiment.

Trevor described an episode in which a short-serving headteacher attempted to introduce several new platforms:

‘There was the fellow who came in and wanted to bring in lots of new programmes... and the staff hated it. When Ruth [pseudonym] came in, she reversed all these decisions, and it’s all gone back to Go4Schools.’

Here collective resistance achieved sufficient visibility and legitimacy to influence leadership decisions. The return to a familiar system was therefore not merely a technical adjustment but a response to widespread staff dissatisfaction. Jonathan described a similar example involving Microsoft Teams:

‘Teams didn’t last at all. We got off that as soon as we possibly could. It was unreliable, it was awkward to use, and it didn’t really seem to benefit the students much. It was a pain.’

In this case collective judgment about utility drove the abandonment of a platform. Resistance was grounded in practical evaluation rather than ideological opposition, yet it had tangible organisational consequences.

Individual concerns, however, did not necessarily produce change. Jonathan explained:

‘I hate Go4Schools. I’m visually impaired, and Go4Schools is really difficult for me to use. It does not work well for me whatsoever... Arbor looks a whole lot better from first experience.’

His accessibility difficulties did not in themselves trigger change. They remained largely unaddressed until broader organisational decisions about platform replacement were already underway. This illustrates a limitation of loosely coupled governance: collective dissatisfaction can shape policy, yet individual needs may remain invisible in the absence of formal consultation mechanisms unless they are taken up within wider norm circles, a point revisited later in discussion.

Platform instability at Larwood School generated change fatigue, weakened the authority of digital mandates and normalised overt disengagement. Teachers exercised agency through platform preference, minimal compliance and, at times, collective pushback capable of reshaping policy. Resistance here is less about evading surveillance than withdrawing effort from systems perceived as unreliable or poorly aligned with practice. These dynamics reinforce this thesis's central claim that platform power is mediated by governance context. Technology does not determine outcomes; organisational conditions shape whether digital systems become instruments of control, objects of apathy or resources selectively appropriated by staff.

7.7 Summary of Larwood School findings

Chapter 7 has examined how Larwood School, a Local Authority-maintained school characterised by leadership instability and fragmented governance, developed a platform trajectory marked less by tightening oversight than by volatility, weak consolidation and uneven enforcement. Repeated transitions between systems, together with limited managerial capacity to embed and sustain a coherent base platform, produced a climate in which digital mandates lacked authority and were routinely reinterpreted. The result was not a coherent platform regime but a pattern of digital drift in which platforms remained present yet only partially institutionalised. This environment enabled overt disengagement, pragmatic substitution and occasional collective resistance.

Like Chapter 6, this chapter has operated primarily within the empirical domain, foregrounding teachers' lived experiences of platform adoption, organisational change and governance. Figure 7.1 consolidates these experiential patterns by mapping each theme to the recurrent consequences reported by participants. It summarises how platform governance was encountered at Larwood School. The patterned developments identified here inform the identification of salient events at the level of the actual, whilst the specification of deeper generative mechanisms is developed through the cross-case analysis in Chapter 8.

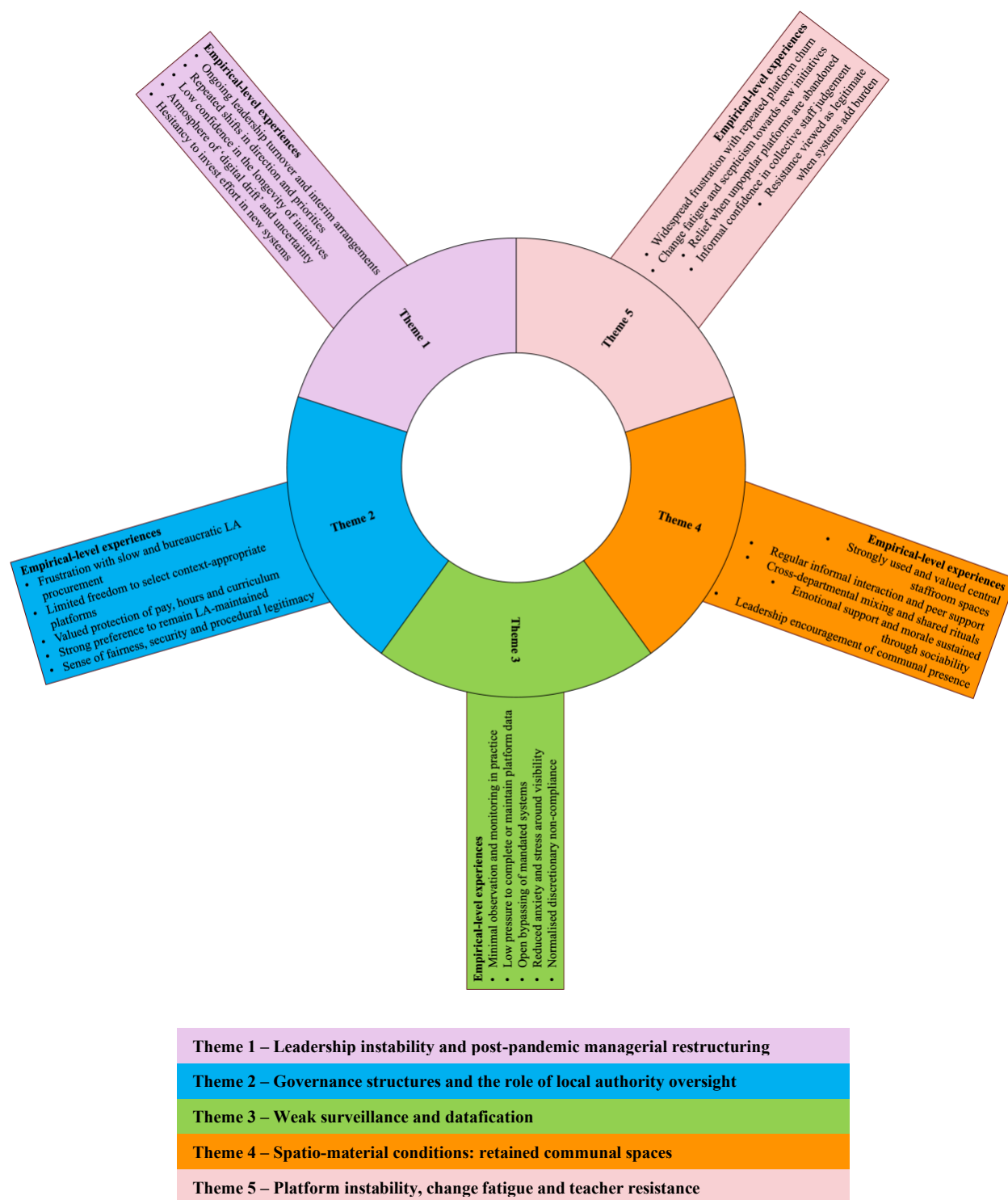


Figure 7.1: Summary of thematic and experiential findings – Larwood School.

The preceding analysis indicates that resistance at Larwood School emerges less as organised opposition than as a practical response to volatility and weak enforcement. Teachers normalised

platform preference and passive non-compliance, most visibly through the widespread use of Google Classroom despite formal expectations to use Go4Schools. Repeated platform transitions generated change fatigue, encouraging minimal engagement with systems perceived as temporary. Resistance also varied by scale: collective dissatisfaction could prompt leadership reversal, whilst individual needs, such as accessibility concerns, remained less visible.

These dynamics reveal a governance environment in which policy and practice remained loosely coupled. Teacher agency operated through both withdrawal of effort and selective appropriation of tools. Looseness did not translate directly into empowerment: the permissive conditions that enabled discretion also fostered longer-term disengagement from school initiatives. Teachers anticipated further change, distrusted platform permanence and adopted a pragmatic stance of minimal engagement. Agency in Larwood School was therefore not entirely oppositional; it was also adaptive, oriented towards coping with uncertainty and sustaining workable routines amid shifting expectations. The outcome was predominantly morphostatic: established ways of working persisted despite successive technological interventions. Within this overall trajectory, small and localised morphogenetic adjustments did emerge as teacher-led norms around discretion and peer support became gradually embedded in everyday practice, though these remained fragile and dependent on continuing structural looseness.

Application to research questions

Figure 7.1 synthesises the experiential (empirical) surface of platform governance at Larwood School. Across the five themes a coherent organisational configuration becomes visible: leadership instability undermined the authority of digital mandates; LA governance constrained the capacity for sweeping change; weak datafication left practice largely ungoverned by metrics; retained communal spaces sustained collegial norms; and persistent platform volatility translated managerial ambition into teacher disengagement rather than compliance.

These developments point towards a predominantly morphostatic trajectory, though one very different in character from that observed at Matson Academy. Here morphostasis was produced not by tightly aligned governance and surveillance but by institutional drift: pre-existing working practices persisted because platforms never acquired sufficient authority to displace them. Digital infrastructures remained loosely coupled with managerial intent, and collegial norms retained a countervailing force that shaped how systems were used, adapted and at times collectively rejected.

The findings speak directly to the study's research questions.

RQ1 (Oversight and autonomy): Digital platforms at Larwood School did not consolidate into a coherent regime of managerial oversight. Leadership turnover, fragmented decision-making and inconsistent enforcement meant that platforms rarely became routine instruments of performance

monitoring. As a result, teachers retained substantial practical autonomy; one that emerged by default from weak governance rather than from explicit trust-based policy.

RQ2 (Mechanisms and governance models): Local Authority constraints, fragmented authority and frequent headteacher turnover functioned as structural conditions that inhibited the systematic embedding of platforms into governance. At the cultural level, collegial norm circles valuing discretion, mutual support and pragmatic judgment retained significant influence, diluting managerial ambitions to standardise practice. The governance model therefore mattered, but not in a simplistic sense: LA governance constrained capacity for sweeping change whilst leadership instability amplified that effect.

RQ3 (Interpretation, negotiation and resistance): Teacher agency at Larwood School was relatively visible and, on occasion, collectively effective. Teachers openly substituted mandated platforms with preferred alternatives, disengaged from systems perceived as unreliable and, in some instances, collectively rejected new digital initiatives. Staffrooms and informal networks provided the relational infrastructure through which such practices were discussed, validated and coordinated, and through which governance itself was, at times, reshaped.

Chapter 7 has therefore established how platform power was experienced and patterned within Larwood School. The task of specifying the generative mechanisms underpinning these patterns, and comparing them with those identified at Matson Academy, is developed in Chapter 8.

8 Cross-case empirical analysis

8.1 Introduction

This chapter turns to the cross-case analysis, drawing together thematic coding, event sequencing and the retroductive, stratified explanation developed through the critical realist approach. It examines how platform governance – understood here as the organisation of oversight and accountability through digital systems – and teacher agency took shape under two contrasting governance settings. Set alongside one another, the cases show how similar digital infrastructures came to be embedded in quite different ways, reflecting the conditions into which they were introduced rather than the technologies themselves.

The comparison does not rest on the assumption that governance structures alone account for these differences. Instead, attention is directed towards how governance arrangements intersected with other conditions: leadership continuity or turnover, the organisation of space, and the expectations circulating amongst staff about digital systems. The task is not to isolate a single explanatory factor, but to trace how these elements combined, enabling some forms of platform governance while constraining others. Platform governance is therefore approached as an outcome that emerges from these interactions, rather than as something fixed in advance.

The three research questions are addressed by examining how platforms became implicated in oversight, how they shaped the scope for teacher discretion, and how staff responded. Platforms are not treated as determining forces. Their effects are understood as contingent, taking shape within particular organisational settings and histories, and mediated through leadership practice and workplace culture.

The chapter moves from the within-case accounts developed in Chapters 6 and 7 towards a cross-case explanation. Retroductive reasoning is used to identify the mechanisms that could plausibly account for the patterns observed in each school. This involves looking beyond what is immediately visible to consider the conditions that make those patterns possible. Particular attention is given to how structural conditions, shared expectations and the responses of teachers and leaders interact over time. The aim is to move from description to explanation without losing sight of how these processes are experienced in daily work.

Where it clarifies what is at stake, a limited use of governmentality is introduced to show how platform-based routines participate in shaping conduct. The discussion draws on calculative practices, disciplinary techniques and subjectivation, not as a separate framework, but as a way of making sense of how visibility, documentation and evaluation come to matter in day-to-day

activity. These ideas remain secondary to the critical realist orientation of the chapter, which continues to organise the explanation.

Two linked tasks structure what follows. The first is to consolidate the within-case findings by showing how themes and sequences of events combined to produce distinct trajectories in each school. The second is to place these trajectories in direct relation, in order to identify the mechanisms that best account for their divergence. In doing so, the chapter explains why Matson Academy moved towards a more settled and tightly organised pattern of digital oversight, while Larwood School remained more uneven, with practices that were open to reinterpretation and adjustment.

The comparison develops the central argument of the thesis. Digital platforms do not operate independently of their context. They become part of existing organisational arrangements that shape how oversight is exercised, how authority is enacted and how everyday practices are organised. Explaining their effects therefore requires attention to the settings in which they are introduced and the ways they are taken up, rather than to the technical properties of the systems alone. Although the two schools used different combinations of tools, they are considered together here insofar as those tools became integrated into broader arrangements of monitoring and evaluation.

The analysis applies the five-stage process set out in Chapter 5 to the cross-case material. Data preparation and familiarisation (Stage 1) underpin the account; thematic consolidation, event mapping and retroductive inference (Stages 2–4) organise the within-case explanations developed in Sections 8.2 and 8.3; and morphogenetic and normative synthesis (Stage 5) drives the cross-case comparison in Section 8.4.

Across these stages, teacher reflexivity is treated as central. The analysis considers how teachers make sense of platform demands, weigh competing pressures and act in response, while recognising that these responses are shaped by, but not reducible to, the conditions in which they occur.

The explanatory approach remains grounded in critical realism, with Archer's morphogenetic framework used to track the relationship between conditions and interaction over time, and Elder-Vass's account of norm circles helping to specify how expectations are sustained or challenged. Where it adds clarity, elements of governmentality are drawn in to illuminate how routine practices contribute to the shaping of conduct, without displacing the core explanatory logic.

The sections that follow examine each school in turn before bringing them into direct comparison. This cross-case analysis provides the empirical basis for the theoretical integration developed in Chapter 9.

8.2 Matson Academy – platform power and structural consolidation

8.2.1 Stages 2–3 – thematic consolidation and event mapping (Matson Academy)

Stage 1 (data preparation and familiarisation) is set out in Chapter 5 and underpins the analysis in Chapter 6. The cross-case account therefore begins at Stages 2–3. At Matson Academy, analysis moved from initial familiarisation into thematic consolidation and event mapping. Interview transcripts, fieldnotes and documentary materials were revisited iteratively to identify recurring patterns in how digital platforms were experienced and acted upon (Fryer, 2022). Following Braun and Clarke's (2020) reflexive thematic approach, attention was directed both to reported practices and to the meanings through which those practices were understood. Early descriptive codes were grouped into interpretive categories and then refined into higher-order themes.

The coding was guided by the study's theoretical orientation, particularly in relation to managerial oversight, autonomy and data-driven accountability. Alongside these areas, the analysis brought into sharper focus the significance of spatio-material and socio-technical change in reshaping teacher–manager relations. The loss or marginalisation of communal staff spaces, together with the expansion of platform-mediated communication, altered the conditions under which informal interaction took place. Opportunities for shared discussion and low-visibility disagreement became more limited, contributing to a more fragmented working environment.

The process also generated a set of emergent sub-themes that had not been specified in advance. These included patterns of performative compliance and scepticism towards data regimes, alongside low-level micro-resistance. Teachers described delaying platform requirements, meeting expectations at a minimal level or quietly reinterpreting demands within departments. These responses did not amount to overt opposition, but they indicate constrained forms of agency within a tightly governed setting.

Five core themes emerged from the Matson Academy case study. They provide the structure for the account presented in Chapter 6 and also organise the event map used in this chapter. Each event is treated as an episode through which a particular aspect of platform governance become embedded. Twelve events were identified, capturing key moments in the introduction and gradual consolidation of platform governance, as well as shifts in staff responses over time. The themes represent patterned experience at the empirical level, the events denote developments at the level of the actual, and the subsequent analysis seeks to identify the generative mechanisms at the level of the real.

8.2.2 Stages 4–5 – retroductive and morphogenetic synthesis (Matson Academy)

The twelve events (see Figure 8.1) are organised around the five thematic domains identified above. The themes capture experience, the events trace developments, and the analysis advances explanation through retroductive and morphogenetic–normative synthesis. The sequence points to a gradual tightening of platform-mediated oversight within a centralised Multi-Academy Trust setting. This was not the result of a single intervention. It developed through the interaction of spatial reorganisation, concentrated authority and a drift towards compliance-oriented expectations.

A full empirical–actual–real mapping is provided in Appendix F. Figure 8.2 offers a worked example for Theme 1, showing how experience, development and explanation are brought into relation within the analytical framework.



Theme 1 – Loss of communal space and fragmentation of collegiality	Event 1: Isolation and loss of collegiality
	Event 2: Fragmentation of staff community
Theme 2 – Managerial centralisation and erosion of teacher voice	Event 3: Top-down platform mandates
	Event 4: Symbolic consultation
	Event 5: Climate of fear and silenced dissent
Theme 3 – Platform adoption and efficiency discourses	Event 6: Work intensification disguised as efficiency
	Event 7: Growing scepticism toward data regimes
Theme 4 – Intensified surveillance and datafication	Event 8: Intensified digital monitoring
	Event 9: Performative data compliance
Theme 5 – Teacher workload, emotional toll and agency	Event 10: Imposed platforms and constrained agency
	Event 11: Minimal compliance
	Event 12: Covert resistance

Figure 8.1: Linked events and explanations – Matson Academy (adapted from Bhaskar, 2008a[1975]).

To illustrate how the stratified ontology is operationalised, Figure 8.2 presents the full mapping for Theme 1.

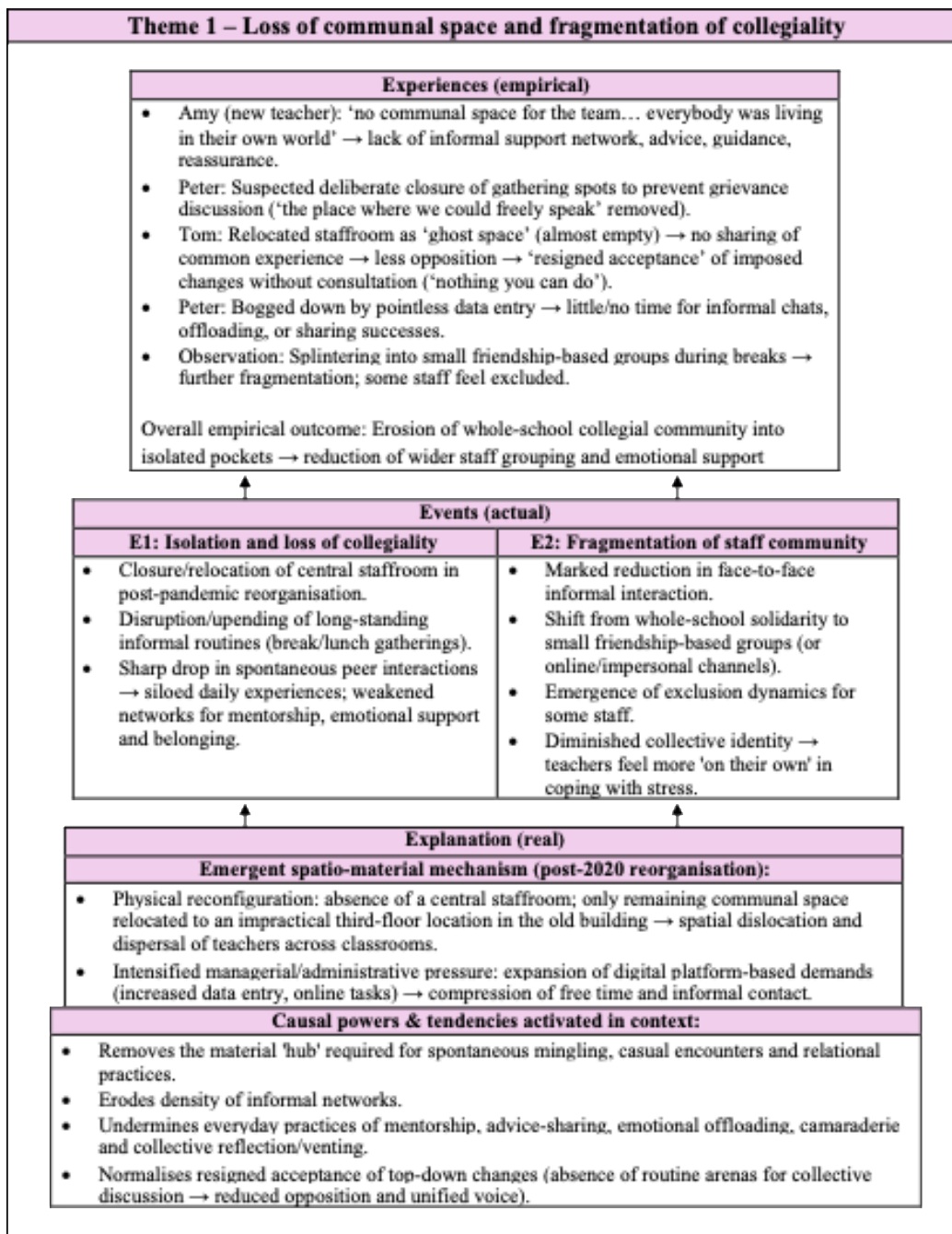


Figure 8.2: Stratified depth ontology for Theme 1 at Matson Academy – loss of communal space and fragmentation of collegiality (adapted from Bhaskar, 2008a[1975]).

Theme 1 – Loss of communal space and fragmentation of collegiality (E1–E2)

Events E1 (Isolation and loss of collegiality) and E2 (Fragmentation of staff community) point to a significant reorganisation of space. The removal or marginalisation of communal staff areas, alongside increased reliance on platform-mediated communication, reduced opportunities for interaction beyond immediate friendship groups. Staff described diminished opportunities for shared discussion and mutual support, and fewer settings in which disagreement could be expressed without risk.

Retroductively, these developments indicate a mechanism of spatial and digital dislocation of the kind traced in Chapter 2, in which the displacement of co-located working by digitally mediated arrangements reconstitutes, and often intensifies, oversight (Felstead, Jewson and Walters, 2005; Halford, 2005). Changes in the organisation of work weakened horizontal ties and reduced the density of everyday interaction. In morphogenetic terms, conditions at T₁ shaped interaction at T₂–T₃ by narrowing the contexts in which collective orientations might form. The outcome at T₄ was a more individualised working environment.

Theme 2 – Managerial centralisation and erosion of teacher voice (E3–E5)

This spatial shift intersected with E3 (Top-down platform mandates), E4 (Symbolic consultation) and E5 (Climate of fear and silenced dissent), through which authority over digital systems became more concentrated. Decision-making was described as opaque, with consultation experienced as largely procedural.

These patterns are best explained by the concentration of authority associated with Multi-Academy Trust governance, combined with the emergence of norms that discouraged challenge and rewarded compliance. During T₂–T₃, these dynamics normalised the expectation that platform-related decisions were not open to negotiation. The result was a morphogenetic shift towards consolidated platform governance, followed by stabilisation as these arrangements became routine.

Theme 3 – Platform adoption and efficiency discourses (E6–E7)

Events E6 (Work intensification disguised as efficiency) and E7 (Growing scepticism toward data regimes) show how efficiency narratives accompanied the expansion of platform use. While some coordination benefits were initially acknowledged, teachers increasingly described administrative work being transferred onto them and questioned the value of the resulting data.

The underlying mechanism can be understood as a performative efficiency logic in which data stand in for quality and accountability, regardless of their usefulness for teaching. This generated growing scepticism, while leaving the organisational centrality of data intact.

Theme 4 – Intensified surveillance and datafication (E8–E9)

The consolidation of oversight becomes most apparent in E8 (Intensified digital monitoring) and E9 (Performative data compliance). Learning walks and dashboard checks extended managerial visibility into classroom activity.

These developments point to a mechanism of continuous visibility. As routine practices became observable, teachers adjusted behaviour in anticipation of scrutiny, keeping indicators within acceptable limits. Over time, this stabilised a form of governance in which control operates through ongoing data production and routine checking rather than direct intervention.

Theme 5 – Teacher workload, emotional toll and agency (E10–E12)

Events E10 (Imposed platforms and constrained agency), E11 (Minimal compliance) and E12 (Covert resistance) show how teachers navigated these conditions. Workload pressures and the erosion of professional boundaries became persistent features of everyday work, with attrition increasingly normalised.

Agency did not disappear, but it remained limited and largely individual. Teachers met requirements at a minimal level or quietly reinterpreted expectations to protect workload. These responses rarely developed into collective challenge. The earlier weakening of shared spaces, combined with compliance-oriented norms, restricted the conditions under which coordinated resistance might emerge.

The Matson Academy case shows a shift towards consolidated platform governance, followed by stabilisation. Spatial reorganisation, centralised authority and compliance-oriented norms combined to produce a configuration characterised by continuous visibility and constrained professional voice. This provides a clear basis for comparison with Larwood School, where different conditions generated a markedly different trajectory.

8.3 Larwood School – institutional drift and agential negotiation

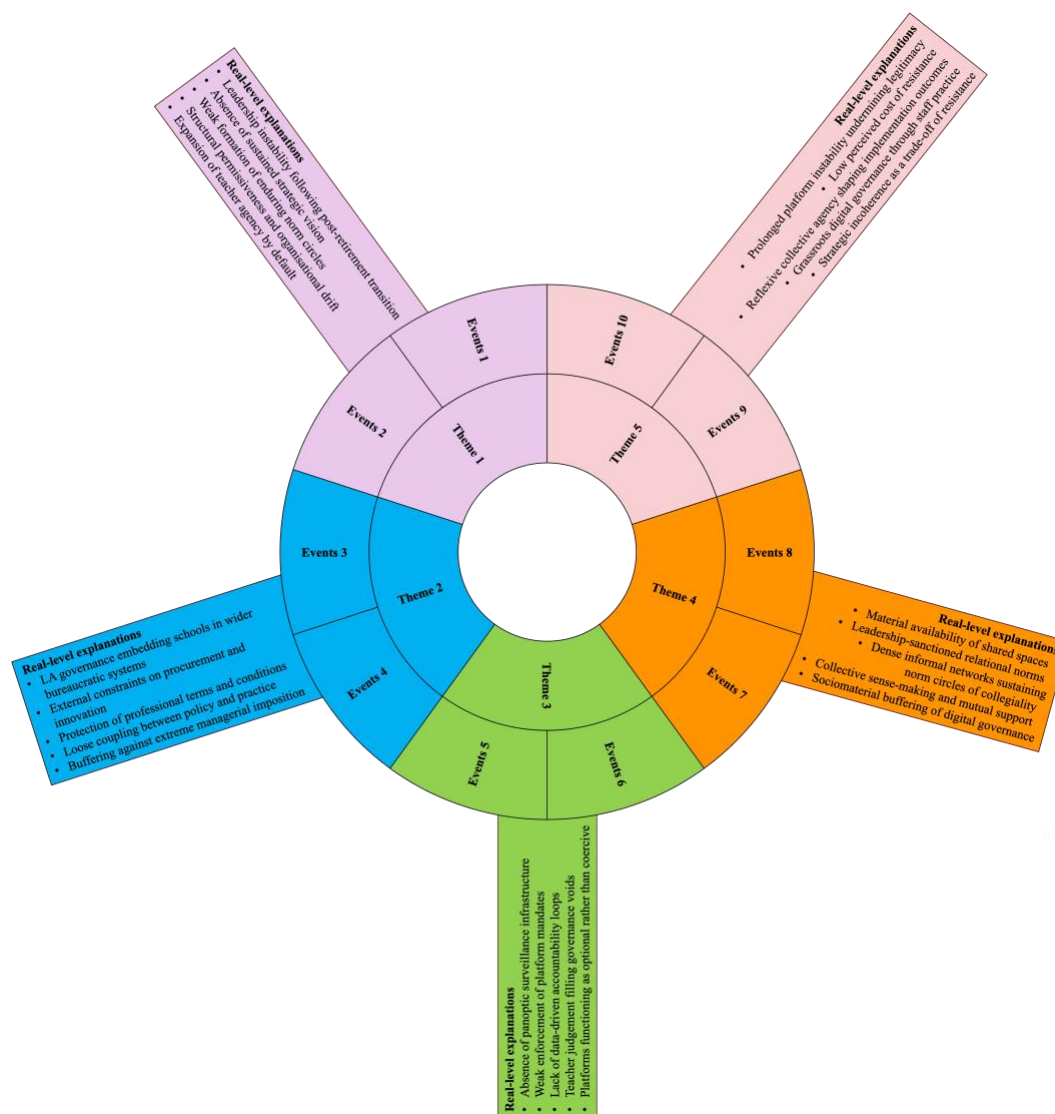
8.3.1 Stages 2–3 – thematic consolidation and event mapping (Larwood School)

As with Matson Academy, Stage 1 (data preparation and familiarisation) is set out in Chapter 5 and underpins the case study account in Chapter 7. The cross-case analysis therefore begins at Stages 2–3. At Larwood School, open and reflexive coding revealed an organisational setting that differed markedly from the more consolidated pattern observed in Matson Academy. Rather than progressive alignment under MAT governance, Larwood School was characterised by discretion and institutional drift. Operating within a local-authority framework, the school combined looser oversight with recurrent leadership turnover and uneven enforcement of digital policy.

Although some overlap with Matson Academy was anticipated, the coding brought into view dynamics that operated differently in this less centralised context. Alongside issues of oversight and workload, particular emphasis fell on the retention of communal spaces and collective forms of resistance. Teachers described considerable latitude to interpret or disregard platform directives, especially where enforcement was weak. Agency was therefore more visible and, at points, shared, rather than contained within individual coping strategies.

Five core themes were identified. These structure the case study account in Chapter 7 and organise the sequence of events used here. Ten events were mapped, capturing episodes of leadership instability, local-authority constraint and the staff responses these generated. A full empirical–actual–real mapping is provided in Appendix G. Figure 8.4 presents a worked example for Theme 1, illustrating how experience, development and explanation are brought together within the analytical framework.

This mapping confirms that, although both schools operated with similar digital systems, the conditions shaping their use diverged substantially. The following section develops this further through retroductive explanation.



Theme 1 – Leadership instability and post-pandemic managerial restructuring	Event 1: Inconsistent digital strategy and ‘digital drift’
	Event 2: Autonomy by default under weak leadership
Theme 2 – Governance structures and the role of local authority oversight	Event 3: Bureaucratic constraints on digital change
	Event 4: Protected working conditions under LA rules
Theme 3 – Weak surveillance and datafication	Event 5: Loose oversight and teacher discretion
	Event 6: Normalised non-compliance with platforms
Theme 4 – Spatio-material conditions: retained communal spaces	Event 7: Preservation of staffroom spaces and informal networks
	Event 8: Staff practices reinforcing community
Theme 5 – Platform instability, change fatigue and teacher resistance	Event 9: Platform churn and staff ‘change fatigue’
	Event 10: Collective resistance and policy reversals

Figure 8.3: Linked events and explanations – Larwood School (adapted from Bhaskar, 2008a[1975]).

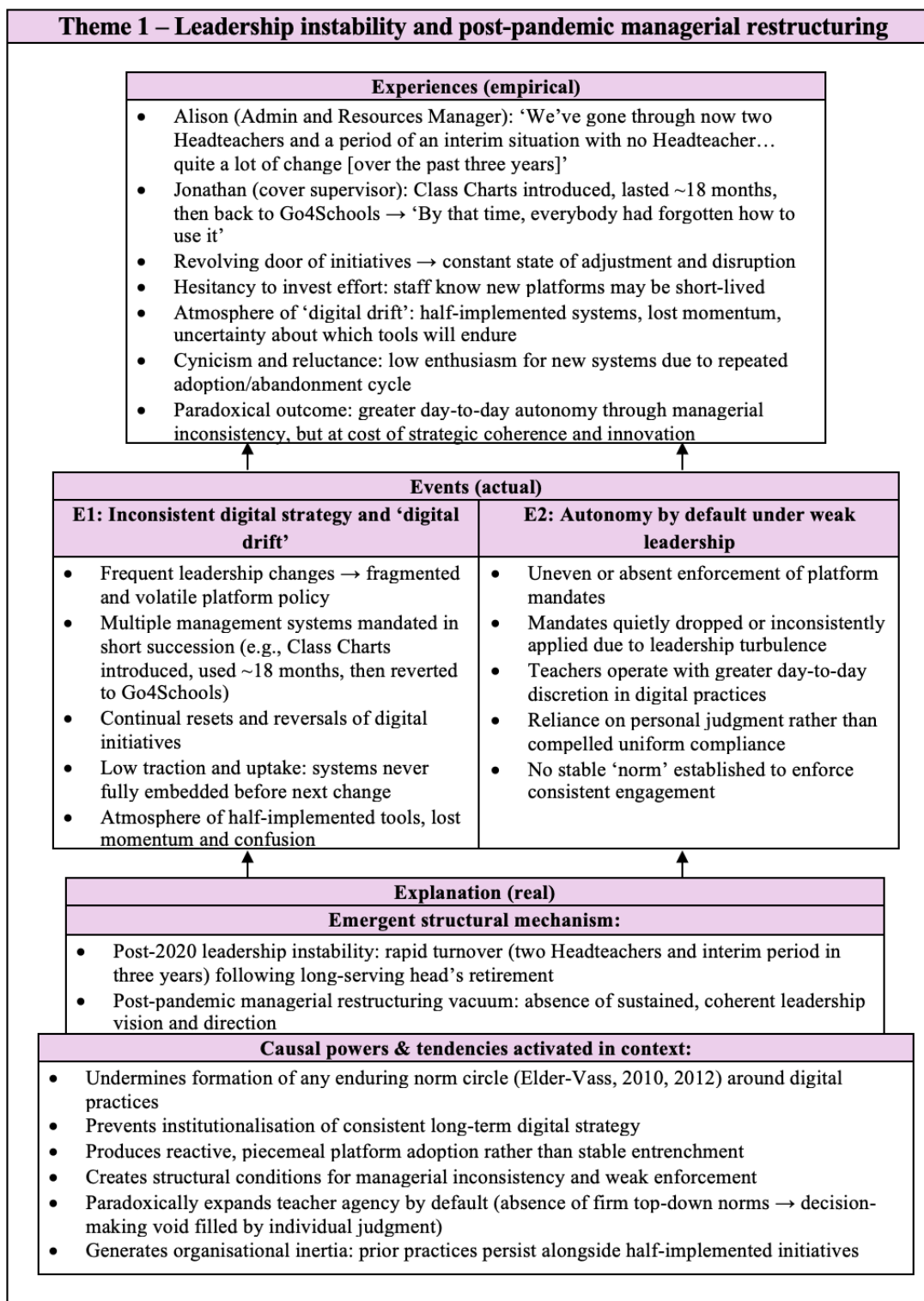


Figure 8.4: Stratified depth ontology for Theme 1 at Larwood School – leadership instability and post-pandemic managerial restructuring (adapted from Bhaskar, 2008a[1975]).

8.3.2 Stages 4–5 – retroductive and morphogenetic synthesis (Larwood School)

As with Matson Academy, the themes summarise patterned experience, the events trace developments and the analysis moves towards explanation by identifying the conditions that make those developments possible.

Theme 1 – Leadership instability and post-pandemic managerial restructuring

Events E1 (Inconsistent digital strategy and ‘digital drift’) and E2 (Autonomy by default under weak leadership) establish a context of instability. Leadership turnover and interim arrangements led to repeated shifts in direction and an absence of sustained digital strategy. Teachers expressed limited confidence in the durability of initiatives and were cautious about investing effort in new systems. These patterns point to a mechanism of weak strategic coupling. Without an enduring direction, expectations around platform use remained unsettled. The conditions at T₁ shaped interaction at T₂–T₃ by widening discretionary space. The outcome at T₄ was not tightly governed implementation, but autonomy that emerged by default.

This contrasts directly with the Matson Academy case, where stable leadership had already aligned digital strategy with the Trust’s improvement agenda before the pandemic. As Marcus put it, the pandemic ‘*lit the touchpaper*’ for acceleration rather than initiating a new direction. Jonathan’s recollection of ‘*three different platforms in three years*’ at Larwood School captures the opposite experience: digital initiatives were encountered as temporary and revisable rather than durable. At Matson Academy, teachers had no equivalent expectation that mandated systems might soon be withdrawn.

Theme 2 – Governance structures and the role of local authority oversight

This context intersects with E3 (Bureaucratic constraints on digital change) and E4 (Protected working conditions under LA rules), reflecting the influence of local-authority governance. Staff noted the slow pace of procurement, yet also valued the protections that LA governance afforded over pay and working conditions. These findings can be understood in relation to the school’s position within wider bureaucratic arrangements, which constrained rapid change while buffering against more extensive managerial intervention.

The structural contrast with Matson Academy is significant. Academy status afforded Matson Academy’s leaders considerable discretion to procure preferred platforms, standardise systems across the Trust and implement coordinated training. At Larwood School, LA compatibility requirements meant that platform selection was shaped less by pedagogical optimisation than by what remained permissible within existing infrastructure. Table 8.1 summarises the principal structural contrasts between the two schools and their implications for platform implementation.

Theme	Matson Academy (academy status)	Larwood School (LA status)
Leadership stability	Stable leadership enforcing top-down digital control	Frequent leadership turnover producing inconsistent adoption
Managerial authority	Highly centralised decision-making, minimal staff consultation	More diffuse and fragmented authority
Digital platform usage	Consistently enforced and used for oversight	Repeated transitions, weak enforcement, selective use
Teacher workload	Intensified through datafication and monitoring	Increased through platform churn and retraining
Governance structure	Autonomy over platform procurement and integration	LA-imposed compatibility limits school-level choice

Table 8.1: Structural and governance differences between Matson Academy and Larwood School, and implications for platform implementation.

Across T₂–T₃, the LA framework produced a loose connection between policy and practice. Formal expectations existed, but they were not consistently enforced, leaving space for local interpretation. The Matson Academy–Larwood School contrast therefore illustrates how governance model mediates the relationship between platform adoption and managerial authority.

Theme 3 – Weak surveillance and datafication

Events E5 (Loose oversight and teacher discretion) and E6 (Normalised non-compliance with platforms) show how limited monitoring shaped everyday practice. Observation was infrequent, expectations around data entry were low and circumventing mandated systems was openly acknowledged. Trevor, who taught at Larwood School’s Sixth Form campus, described the near-total absence of sustained lesson observation after the initial week of term; the contrast with the daily unannounced learning walks and dashboard scrutiny described by staff at Matson Academy is stark.

This reflects the absence of a strongly embedded data-driven accountability culture. In this setting, teacher judgment filled the space that might otherwise have been occupied by formal oversight. Platforms functioned as optional tools rather than instruments of control. Over time, this stabilised a pattern in which selective engagement became routine. At Matson Academy, where equivalent lapses would quickly become visible through platform reports or line-management scrutiny, such casual non-compliance was difficult to sustain. The two cases therefore show how governance intensity shapes not only the form of resistance but its visibility: covert in a tightly monitored setting, overt where oversight is weak.

Theme 4 – Spatio-material conditions: retained communal spaces

The role of spatio-material conditions is most apparent in E7 (Preservation of staffroom spaces and informal networks) and E8 (Staff practices reinforcing community). Centrally located staffrooms and the regular interaction they made possible sustained dense collegial networks and everyday peer support. Alison described the provision across both Larwood School sites: centrally positioned staffrooms with computers, free tea and coffee, and a welcoming environment designed to encourage congregation. Weekly ‘Cake Friday’ gatherings reinforced cross-departmental interaction and morale.

These developments indicate a mechanism of spatio-material buffering. The availability of shared space, together with norms that valued presence and interaction, supported the reproduction of collegial orientations, sustaining the relational spaces through which trust and open staff exchange are reproduced (Frelin and Grannäs, 2014; Baldry, 1999). This contrasts directly with the situation at Matson Academy, where the loss or marginalisation of communal areas, including the conversion of the Sixth Form staffroom into an IT office and the absence of a central staffroom in the newer building, contributed to the fragmentation of collegial ties and the erosion of informal support networks. The Principal at Matson Academy had made clear that ‘the days of teachers sitting around drinking coffee are over’; at Larwood School, provision of free tea and coffee was understood as deliberately sustaining community. These spatio-material differences were not incidental. They shaped the social conditions under which collective sense-making and shared resistance were either possible or curtailed.

In morphogenetic terms, conditions across T₁–T₃ at Larwood School enabled the continued enactment of shared expectations, making discussion, mutual support and collective challenge both possible and legitimate.

Theme 5 – Platform instability, change fatigue and teacher resistance

Events E9 (Platform churn and staff ‘change fatigue’) and E10 (Collective resistance and policy reversals) capture the effects of repeated cycles of adoption and abandonment. Teachers described scepticism towards new initiatives, relief when systems were withdrawn and confidence in collective judgment. At points, this collective dissatisfaction achieved tangible results: the reversal of unpopular platform decisions by incoming leadership illustrates how, where monitoring is weak and staffrooms sustain shared norms, resistance can move from private scepticism to visible organisational consequence.

At Matson Academy, the corresponding pattern was reversed. Collective resistance was largely foreclosed by surveillance and compliance-oriented norms, compounded by the erosion of the communal spaces that might otherwise have supported shared challenge. Individual teachers there

relied on covert tactics – minimal compliance, selective data entry, informal WhatsApp channels – rather than overt collective voice. The Larwood School evidence therefore clarifies, by contrast, the conditions under which collective agency can develop: preserved communal infrastructure and weakly enforced mandates, within a culture that continued to treat professional judgment as legitimate.

These patterns point to a mechanism in which instability reduces the perceived authority of digital mandates. When systems are unlikely to endure, the incentive to comply weakens. This creates conditions in which collective responses can shape outcomes. Rather than consolidating platform use, these dynamics left more room for everyday practice to determine how technologies were actually employed.

Reflecting on the Larwood School case as a whole reveals a trajectory that differs from that observed in Matson Academy. Platform governance remained loosely coupled, with practices that were negotiated, uneven and open to adjustment. Leadership instability, limited surveillance and strong communal infrastructures combined to produce a setting in which deviation was tolerated and collective agency more visible.

8.4 Stages 4–5 – cross-case retroductive and morphogenetic–normative synthesis

This section brings the two cases into direct relation. Its purpose is to explain how pre-existing structural and cultural conditions at T_1 shaped interaction at T_2 – T_3 and produced different outcomes at T_4 across the two schools. Building on the themes and event sequences developed in Sections 8.2 and 8.3, the analysis moves towards retroductive explanation by identifying the mechanisms through which similar digital systems became associated with contrasting organisational settlements and different forms of teacher agency.

8.4.1 Structural and cultural conditioning (T_1)

Although both schools were located within an English state education system increasingly shaped by demands for data visibility and managerial efficiency, they entered the pandemic from markedly different organisational starting points. At T_1 , in Archer's terms (1995), those differences were historically contingent and materially embedded in legal status, governance arrangements and everyday working culture. Following Archer's realist ontology, structural and cultural conditioning are treated as analytically distinct in order to identify the emergent properties that shaped, though did not determine, subsequent action.

Structural conditioning corresponds to structural emergent properties (SEPs): relatively durable institutional arrangements and spatio-material configurations that predated the pandemic and influenced the scope for platform implementation and oversight (Archer, 1995, 2011). In this study they include governance structure (MAT versus LA), leadership stability and the degree of platform standardisation already in place before 2020. Cultural conditioning corresponds to cultural emergent properties (CEPs): the ideational and normative inheritances through which institutional expectations are interpreted (Archer, 2011). These include orientations towards managerial authority, norms of compliance or discretion, and the relative weight attached to data visibility as against relational trust. As Thursfield and Hamblett (2004:123) note, ‘CEPs belong to the strata of ideas, theories and beliefs, and are independent of cultural agents (people),’ yet they shape how actors judge what is possible, legitimate and worthwhile.

The full cross-case comparison of SEPs and CEPs is provided in Appendix H (Tables H1–H2). What follows concentrates on the contrasts that are most explanatory for the trajectories traced in Sections 8.2 and 8.3.

The stable leadership within Matson Academy’s centralised MAT structure had already enabled the rollout of standardised, top-down platform policies before the pandemic. Systems such as Satchel One, Go4Schools and BlueSky were mandated across the Trust with little room for local adaptation. These systems were tied to routine practices of monitoring and reporting, linking data visibility to managerial oversight and performance management. The removal or marginalisation of communal staff spaces formed part of this broader reorganisation, weakening the practical basis for informal interaction and shifting communication into platform-mediated channels that were easier to audit. Within this setting, effective teaching became increasingly associated with documentation and evidential visibility, reinforcing CEPs consistent with performative accountability.

In Larwood School, the pre-pandemic context was more fragmented. Leadership instability inhibited the consolidation of a coherent digital strategy, while departments worked across multiple systems (for example, SIMS for administration, Google Classroom for learning and Go4Schools for data) with limited consistency or oversight. The ransomware attack of September 2020 compounded this instability by disrupting data continuity and delaying the proposed move to Arbor. At the same time, important elements of the school’s spatial and cultural infrastructure remained intact. Staffrooms continued to function as social hubs and platform enforcement remained relatively light-touch. Teachers therefore retained considerable discretion over how, and whether, to use particular systems. The corresponding CEPs were grounded in a culture that valued collective community and individual staff judgment. Scepticism towards datafication remained significant.

These T₁ properties conditioned the field of possible action once the pandemic intensified demands around digital systems at T₂. The interaction of governance arrangements, spatial organisation and platform infrastructures, together with the workplace norms and interpretive frames belonging to the cultural domain, generated different situational logics. As Archer (1995:196) puts it, ‘all structural influences (i.e. the generative powers of SEPs and CEPs) are mediated to people, shaping the situations in which they find themselves.’ Conditioning did not determine the outcome, but it set the terms within which digital governance could be interpreted, enacted and contested.

Three examples illustrate how these differences were already in place by 2020.

The first concerns communal space. At Matson Academy, the Principal had explicitly devalued communal teacher time, openly stating that *‘the days of teachers sitting around drinking coffee are over’* – a symbolic devaluation of communal space, which organisation studies reads as communicating organisational priorities rather than as neutral backdrop (Dale and Burrell, 2007; Elsbach and Pratt, 2007). By 2020 this orientation had been materially realised in the absence of a central staffroom in active use. At Larwood School, by contrast, staffrooms were preserved as social hubs, with everyday provisions such as free tea and coffee reinforcing collegial interaction. As Alison observed, having a welcoming staffroom *‘is really good for bringing staff together’*. When the pandemic arrived, Matson Academy therefore entered the period with weaker informal networks of support than Larwood School, where relational ties were already dense and regularly renewed.

The second concerns leadership and digital strategy. In Matson Academy, stable leadership had already aligned digital strategy with the Trust’s improvement and accountability agenda. As Marcus put it, the pandemic *‘lit the touchpaper’* for acceleration rather than initiating a new direction. In Larwood School, leadership turnover generated instability. Jonathan’s recollection of *‘three different platforms in three years’* captures a context in which digital initiatives were experienced as temporary and revisable rather than durable. At Matson Academy, teachers had no equivalent expectation that mandated systems might soon be withdrawn.

The third concerns relations of trust and managerial intrusion. In Larwood School, earlier leadership patterns had sustained a culture in which teachers’ judgment retained legitimacy. Rachel’s comment that staff were *‘not encouraged to stay in [their] office all day’* suggests an idea of visibility grounded in collegial presence rather than surveillance. In Matson Academy, daily learning walks and reminders about missing data entries normalised managerial intrusion and anticipatory compliance. The absence of consultative structures – governing bodies experienced as ‘toothless dogs’, decisions presented as settled outcomes – deepened this climate. When teaching moved online, Matson Academy therefore reproduced pre-existing accountability norms through intensified digital tracking, while Larwood School showed more selective uptake, often organised around usefulness and wellbeing.

These contrasts suggest that Matson Academy entered T₂ structurally consolidated and culturally primed for the reproduction and intensification of existing governance relations, whereas Larwood School entered the same period with a more fragmented structure and a culture more disposed towards negotiated enactment.

8.4.2 Social interaction and teacher agency (T₂–T₃)

During T₂–T₃, covering the pandemic period and its immediate aftermath, the two schools displayed sharply different interactional logics.

Interaction remained largely within morphostatic parameters in Matson Academy. The abrupt shift to remote teaching in 2020, followed by the embedding of digital routines into normal school practice, intensified pre-existing performative expectations. Teachers followed prescribed data-entry routines on platforms such as Go4Schools and Satchel One, while senior leaders monitored remote learning through checks on assignment setting, marking and student engagement. Resistance was rarely overt. More often it appeared as strategic minimalism, with staff doing enough to avoid attention while trying to protect themselves from additional scrutiny. The absence of communal spaces, compounded by social distancing, reduced opportunities for collective discussion and weakened the conditions under which shared challenge might emerge. One teacher remarked that *‘the pandemic gave them [leadership] an excuse to track everything digitally’*. In these circumstances, pragmatic reflexivity predominated. Immediate performance demands and job security tended to outweigh broader educational commitments, and the crisis reinforced rather than disrupted the existing governance configuration (Archer, 2013).

Interaction during T₂–T₃ was more uneven in Larwood School. Remote learning generated pressures for everyone, but these were not accompanied by strong surveillance or standardised expectations. Many teachers described experimenting with digital tools while prioritising student engagement and wellbeing over exhaustive data capture. One geography teacher explained that they *‘did the important parts and skipped the rest’*, knowing that enforcement was limited. Informal collegial networks supported this approach. Staff shared advice and reassurance through departmental WhatsApp groups and other informal channels, sometimes using humour to legitimise selective non-compliance. Once face-to-face teaching resumed, staffrooms quickly regained their place in the everyday life of the school, and leadership did not obstruct the restoration of physical collegiality.

By the end of T₃, both schools had settled into more stable day-to-day patterns, but the nature of those patterns differed significantly. Matson Academy consolidated an intensified regime of accountability, a ‘new normal’ of platform-mediated visibility and compliance. Larwood School settled into a more pluralistic arrangement in which teacher discretion remained widely tolerated

and often collectively affirmed. A fuller comparison of these interactional patterns is provided in Appendix I.

The analysis in Sections 8.2 and 8.3 also suggest that these interactional patterns were sustained in part by informal normative pressures concerning what counted as appropriate engagement with platforms in each school. Rather than developing that point fully here, Chapter 9 takes it up directly by examining how normative endorsement and informal sanctioning stabilised or reworked expectations across the two settings.

8.4.3 Emergent outcomes (T₄) and reflexive feedback

By late 2021 and into 2022, both schools were consolidating post-pandemic arrangements, but the outcomes of that process differed markedly. In Archer's terms, the key question at T₄ is whether interaction at T₂–T₃ primarily reproduced existing structural and cultural properties or generated more durable elaboration and reconfiguration. A comparative summary of outcomes at T₄ is provided in Appendix J.

Across both cases, change occurred. What differed was the content of that change, its direction and what subsequently became stabilised. It is therefore useful to think about T₄ in terms of what altered and what then settled into routine.

Matson Academy

The period saw the accelerated institutionalisation of continuous visibility and performative accountability at Matson Academy. Digital systems became more firmly embedded as infrastructures of oversight. During T₂–T₃, dashboard routines and audit trails expanded in both scope and frequency, extending managerial visibility into everyday classroom activity. Oversight shifted away from occasional observation towards continuous, data-mediated monitoring. At the same time, spatial reorganisation and the marginalisation of communal spaces weakened the informal infrastructures that might otherwise have supported collective reflection or challenge. Legitimacy increasingly became tied to visible compliance with platform expectations. Teachers responded largely through adaptation, with agency taking the form of selective compliance and quiet rule-bending.

By T₄, these developments had stabilised into a routinised configuration. Platform-oriented accountability had become normalised and, in important respects, detached from pedagogical meaning, reinforcing compliance even where educational value was doubted; platform-mediated visibility had become an ordinary condition of teaching, and data-driven oversight standard managerial practice. The outcome is best understood as morphostatic reproduction: a consolidated

regime of platform-mediated accountability in which asymmetrical teacher–manager relations are intensified and possibilities for collective reworking remain limited.

The overall settlement in Matson Academy is therefore one of high visibility and infrastructural integration, in which managerial authority is strengthened and agency remains predominantly defensive and individualised.

Larwood School

The T₄ settlement was more ambiguous in the Larwood School case. The school did not become digitally transformative and in many respects slipped back towards earlier habits, yet it also resisted the consolidation of a full datafication regime. Morphogenesis here did not take the form of intensified digital control but of drift and negotiated enactment. Leadership instability and uneven enforcement prevented the crystallisation of a coherent digital strategy. Repeated platform changes weakened the authority of new initiatives. Teachers exercised discretion over how and whether platforms were used, supported by communal staff spaces and collegial networks. Situated judgment, whether individual or departmental, remained a legitimate organising principle, and episodes of collective pushback shaped the revision or abandonment of particular applications.

By T₄, this looseness had itself become durable. Platform use remained uneven, but that unevenness produced a workable equilibrium rather than organisational breakdown. Negotiated compliance and collegially mediated interpretations of practice persisted, with oversight remaining relatively light. Rather than developing into an intensive surveillance regime, the school stabilised a weakly coupled arrangement in which platforms coexisted with strong local filtering.

The overall settlement in Larwood School is therefore a stabilised but negotiated governance configuration in which digital systems remain present without becoming dominant organising infrastructures, and teacher voice retains greater legitimacy.

From a morphogenetic perspective, these outcomes also reflect reflexive feedback from T₂–T₃ into later structural elaboration. In Matson Academy, pragmatic reflexivity predominated, with staff coping within relatively fixed constraints and thereby contributing to the reproduction and intensification of the existing governance logic. In Larwood School, reflexive responses were more varied. Communicative deliberation and autonomous action enabled teachers to establish small but durable adjustments in how platforms were used. These adaptations gradually became normalised in local practice, indicating modest morphogenetic movement without amounting to wholesale transformation.

Although the focus here is on structural elaboration at T₄, the durability of these outcomes depended on the continued reproduction of informal expectations about ‘how things are done’ in

each setting. Chapter 9 develops this point by specifying how such expectations acquired causal force and helped determine whether platform demands were experienced as settled, negotiable or contestable.

8.5 Summary of cross-case findings

Using Archer's morphogenetic sequence (T_1 – T_4) as an organising framework and drawing on Bhaskar's critical realist ontology, this chapter has explained how contrasting structural and cultural conditions in the two schools produced divergent trajectories of digital governance during the pandemic and its aftermath. Similar platforms did not generate similar effects because their enactment was mediated by governance arrangements, local expectations and spatio-material conditions.

Platform governance operated as a mechanism of top-down consolidation in Matson Academy. Existing hierarchies were amplified through digital infrastructures and managerial routines, producing heightened visibility and constrained professional voice. The outcome was a consolidated regime of intensified performative oversight, reproduced morphostatically through routine data practices and defensive, individualised agency.

Platform governance was characterised by drift and negotiation in Larwood School. Leadership instability and weak policy coherence created discretionary space that teachers were able to occupy, both individually and collectively, while a stronger collegial infrastructure supported coordination and shared judgment. Platform use remained uneven, yet this variability itself became stabilised as a hybrid settlement in which data did not acquire the same governing authority and remained open to reinterpretation.

In explanatory terms, Matson Academy shows how crisis can harden managerial control where infrastructures of visibility are institutionally aligned. Larwood School, by contrast, shows the scope for countervailing agency where such infrastructures remain weakly embedded and collegial supports persist. Across both cases, the findings reinforce the point that platform-generated data does not exert power inherently. It becomes powerful where data are culturally privileged and routinely mobilised as an authoritative proxy for competent practice.

Bridging to Chapter 9

Chapter 9 develops the theoretical implications of these findings. It conceptualises platform governance as an emergent and evolving configuration rather than a fixed condition, examining how it is shaped through the interaction of structural conditions, digital architectures and normative alignment. Organised around the three research questions, Chapter 9 deepens the account of

normative power through norm circles, uses governmentality as a complementary lens on self-regulation and anticipatory compliance, and reflects on the conditions under which reflexive agency remains tactical rather than transformative.

9 Discussion

9.1 Introduction

This chapter moves beyond the empirical findings presented in Chapters 6-8 to explain them, interpreting them through the literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3 and the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 4. Whereas the preceding chapters examined teachers' experiences empirically, the purpose here is to move from case analysis to explanatory synthesis, identifying the mechanisms and conditions that account for the contrasting patterns of platform governance observed across the two schools. In doing so, this chapter develops three main contributions. First, it interprets digital platforms as instruments of normative power through the integration of Bhaskar's stratified ontology, Archer's morphogenetic approach and Elder-Vass's norm circles. Second, it demonstrates the value of norm circles as a meso-level explanatory framework for comparative analysis through the NC maps presented in Sections 9.3. Third, it considers the implications for Organisation Studies and HRM of how digital platforms (re)organise managerial control and teachers' work through normative influence and the spatio-material restructuring of work.

Section 9.2 draws together the main theoretical strands developed earlier in the thesis, showing how debates on labour process, teacher professionalism, surveillance and platformisation provide the basis for adopting Elder-Vass's concept of norm circles as the meso-level explanatory framework used to interpret the empirical findings. The discussion then proceeds through five themes: norm circles and normative pressures in the case schools (9.3), digital platforms and managerial oversight (9.4), teacher autonomy and reflexive agency (9.5), platform-mediated surveillance and performativity (9.6), and the spatio-material reorganisation of working life (9.7).

Norm circles provide the organising mechanism for the chapter because they explain *how* the structural and cultural conditions identified earlier acquire normative force within particular school settings. The normative patterns mapped in Section 9.3 are therefore not simply descriptive background, they provide the explanatory basis for understanding compliance, surveillance effects, the enabling and constraining of teacher agency, and forms of resistance. Although the themes developed in Sections 9.4–9.7 are separated analytically, they are not independent; each is

explained through these norm circle configurations as the mechanism through which the observed patterns emerge.

9.2 Situating the analysis: from labour process to norm circles

This section draws together the strands of argument developed in the literature reviews and theoretical framework, providing the foundations for the discussion that follows. It revisits the position reached in the labour process debate (2.4.4), the account of teacher professionalism (2.5), and the analysis of surveillance and subjectivation (2.4.5). It also returns to the central arguments of Chapter 3 concerning platformisation and datafied governance and explains why, as noted above, Elder-Vass's concept of norm circles, developed in Chapter 4, plays a central role in interpreting the empirical findings.

The tensions between managerial authority and teacher discretion, now increasingly mediated through digital platforms, extend beyond education and have long been the subject of debate about the organisation and control of work. Braverman's (1974) account of deskilling positioned technology not as a neutral tool but as a site of contestation over skill and authority, while subsequent work demonstrated that labour management is more varied than a straightforward top-down exercise of managerial power. Friedman's (1977) distinction between direct control and responsible autonomy and Burawoy's (1979) account of the manufacture of consent both show that workplace relations are always negotiated and contested rather than a fixed expressions of organisational hierarchy.

Since the late twentieth century, labour process theory has increasingly examined normative and internalised forms of control alongside more traditional managerial mechanisms. Sewell and Wilkinson's (1992) 'electronic panopticon' combined vertical electronic monitoring with horizontal peer surveillance, while Barker's (1993) study of concertive control demonstrated how workers granted autonomy came to establish and enforce value-based rules governing their own conduct, creating a form of regulation experienced as self-imposed. Read through Elder-Vass's (2010) concept of norm circles, Barker's account suggests that collectively shared values can become group-level normative mechanisms through which workplace conduct is regulated. Related concerns were subsequently reflected in analyses of knowledge work through the concept of digital Taylorism (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011) and in studies of algorithmic control, which examined how digital technologies reshape the monitoring and evaluation of work (Kellogg, Valentine and Christin, 2020). Rather than introducing managerial oversight where it had previously been absent, these developments recombined established forms of labour control through new infrastructures of visibility, measurement and coordination. The platformisation of

English schools is therefore better understood as an education-specific extension of these longer historical developments than as a distinct technological departure.

Teacher professionalism followed a similar trajectory (2.5). Historically, teaching was characterised by individual discretions largely based on pedagogical expertise and trust, rather than continuous external measurement. This shift is reflected in Hoyle's (1974) distinction between professionalism, referring to the collective standing of the role, and professionalism, referring to the judgment exercised by teachers. As Chapter 2 showed, however, the conditions under which that discretion was exercised changed progressively through three phases, from relative to controlled and then productive autonomy (Gleeson and Gunter, 2001), as marketisation, new managerialism, New Public Management and Ball's (2003) 'terrors of performativity' increasingly reshaped teaching practice around measurable outcomes. Under productive autonomy, teacher discretion became inseparable from self-regulation, a condition Beck (2008) describes as governmental professionalism. Expectations of continual self-monitoring and comparison were therefore embedded within school accountability systems long before digital platforms became ubiquitous. These technologies intensified, rather than created, existing forms of subjectivity.

Although related, control and surveillance are distinctly separate concepts. As argued in Chapter 2 (2.4.5), control concerns the mechanisms through which effort and compliance is directed, whereas surveillance refers to the collection and use of information that makes activity visible and open to intervention (Lyon, 2007). Interpreted through Foucault's (1977) conception of power as productive in the sense that it constitutes individuals as particular kinds of subjects rather than simply constraining their behaviour, surveillance is significant not simply because it makes behaviour observable but because it contributes to the process of subjectivation. Under conditions of continual visibility, teachers internalise the possibility of observation and regulate their own conduct, so that surveillance helps produce particular teacher-subjects rather than merely documenting existing practices (Townley, 1994; Knights and Willmott, 1989). Zuboff's (1988) concept of informed work extended this argument into digital environments, where activity translated into data becomes increasingly governable. However, as Chapter 2 also argued, a purely disciplinary account is insufficient because contemporary surveillance is increasingly dispersed and networked (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000). Visibility should therefore be understood not as a constituting control in itself but as a condition that enables control. That distinction is important for the discussion that follows. Visibility alone cannot explain why teacher compliance occurs.

The discussion in Chapter 3 extended these arguments to platform power and datafied governance. The rapid expansion of the EdTech sector, accelerated by the pandemic, produced an increasingly concentrated market in which commercially developed platforms quickly became embedded within schools, while the reframing of education from public good to data commodity extended the logics of surveillance capitalism (Williamson, 2017b; Zuboff, 2019). Governmentality, therefore, provided a productive, though limited, perspective for understanding how calculative

practices, disciplinary techniques and processes of subject formation make teaching measurable and locate teachers within systems of evaluation. These perspectives explain *how* platform governance operates more clearly than *why* particular forms of governance emerge.

The critical realist framework set out in Chapter 4 provides a means of better explaining these underlying conditions. Bhaskar's (2005 [1979]) metaphor of the real, actual and empirical strata allows platform governance to be understood as an emergent outcome of interacting causal powers, combining structural emergent properties (SEPs), such as MAT governance and accountability arrangements; cultural emergent properties (CEPs), including prevailing professional norms and expectations; and the agential powers of teachers, including their concerns and reflexive capacities. Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach adds a temporal dimension, showing more specifically how conditions at T_1 shape interactions at T_2 – T_3 and generate outcomes at T_4 that either reproduce existing arrangements or produce limited change. This temporalised account helps explain the contrasting trajectories observed across the two schools. Within this framework, governmentality is retained as a complementary rather than foundational perspective: critical realism explains the causal conditions under which platform governance emerges, while Foucauldian concepts spotlight how particular aspects of self-regulation are experienced by teachers, often through emerging forms of visibility and comparison. Figure 9.1 illustrates how these theoretical resources map onto Bhaskar's domains.

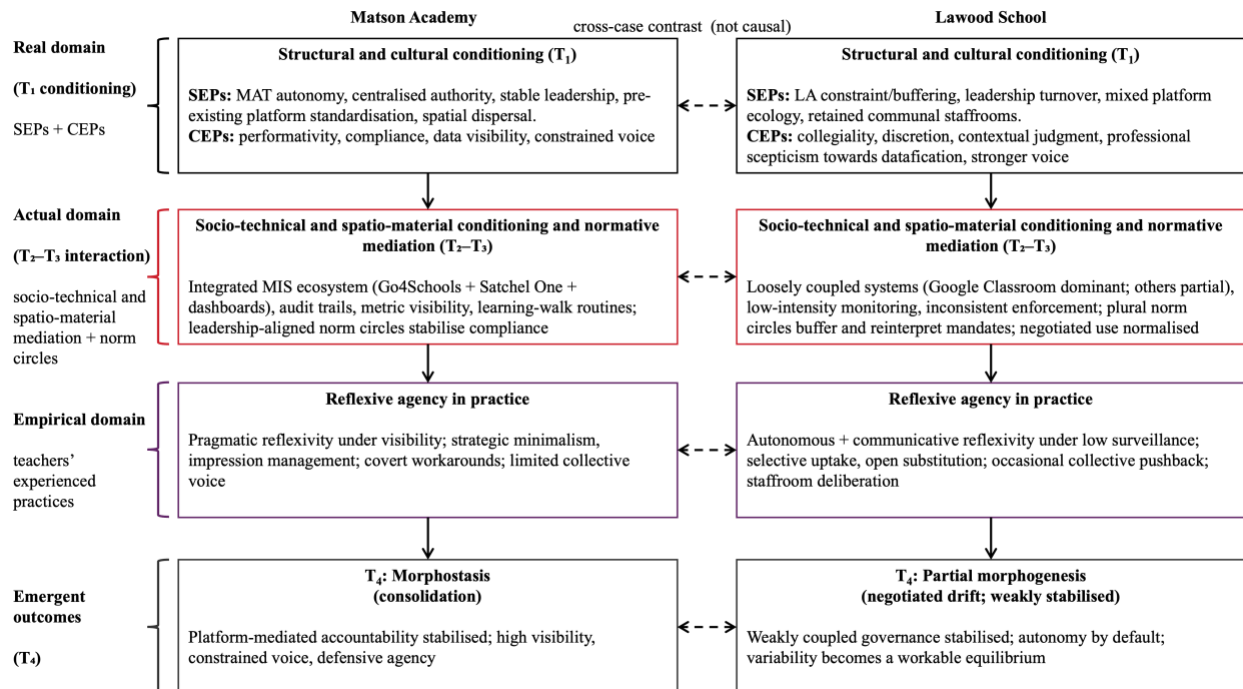


Figure 9.1: Organisation of ontological domains and the morphogenetic approach.

These theoretical and empirical strands are brought together through Elder-Vass's (2010) concept of norm circles. As argued throughout this thesis, norm circles identify the social groups through which expectations are collectively established, reinforced and, at times, contested, explaining how structural and cultural conditions acquire normative force within particular school settings. A norm circle comprises those who sustain a norm by endorsing behaviour that conforms to it and sanctioning behaviour that diverges from it. Through these processes of approval and disapproval, norms acquire causal force by shaping expectations of appropriate conduct. This approach also addresses a specific gap in Archer's framework: while distinguishing between SEPs and CEPs, she says relatively little about the social groupings through which particular expectations are maintained.

Norm circles also provide the point of convergence for the preceding literatures. The labour process debate concludes in normative and concertive forms of control, where shared values become enforceable norms (Barker, 1993). The literature on professionalism traces the emergence of a self-regulating and accountable professional subject, while Foucauldian analyses explain processes of subjectivation but leave relatively underdeveloped the social organisation of anticipated judgment within specific school contexts. Similarly, the calculative practices described in Chapter 3 establish expectations that become effective only when collectively recognised and reinforced. Norm circles explain how these diverse pressures are collectively sustained and translated into school practice.

For this reason, norm circles provide the organising mechanism for the discussion that follows. They also help to explain why platform governance developed differently across the two schools. Where influential norm circles endorse platform use as an indicator of what it means to be an effective teacher, compliance can become largely self-regulating. Where those circles remain divided or sceptical, implementation is more uneven and negotiated. Similar digital infrastructures can therefore generate markedly different governance arrangements, producing a compliance-oriented settlement at Matson Academy but a looser and more negotiated pattern at Larwood School. Section 9.3 begins by mapping the configuration of norm circles across each school (Figures 9.2 and 9.3) before examining how collective endorsement and sanction translate structural and cultural conditions into patterned organisational practice. The subsequent sections return to these normative patterns throughout the analysis.

9.3 Norm circles and normative pressures in the case schools

As the preceding chapters showed, patterns of compliance and resistance across the two schools were not sustained primarily through formal rules or hierarchical enforcement. Expectations about appropriate conduct and legitimate teaching practice were reproduced through peer endorsement, informal sanctioning and shared understandings within and across groups. These findings require

an account of how normative pressure acquires causal force through social relations rather than being imposed only through formal policy. The analysis therefore turns to norm circles, which offer a way of tracing how norms are collectively generated, reinforced and contested within a critical realist framework (Archer, 1995; Elder-Vass, 2010, 2012).

This section draws together the findings from Chapters 6 and 7 by mapping the configuration of norm circles in each school and examining how they produced distinct normative climates. The aim is to trace the processes of downward and upward causation across the two cases. Whereas the earlier chapters presented school-level narratives, the discussion here brings the cases into direct comparison by modelling the relations between different levels of grouping, from organisational to departmental to teacher-led. Norm circles add a dimension that neither structural analysis nor Archer's morphogenetic model fully provides on its own: they specify the group-level social mechanisms through which SEPs and CEPs acquire normative force. Other critical realist accounts of organisational governance, including those attentive to power and institutional change, have tended to remain at the level of emergent structural and cultural properties without theorising the group-level processes through which particular norms are endorsed and reproduced (see, for example, Bhaskar, 2005[1979]; Sayer, 2000). The NC maps that follow address that gap.

The particular NC configuration mapped at Matson Academy, with its concentrated downward causation and limited countervailing normative power, is not independent of the governance conditions examined in Chapter 2. The autonomy granted to MAT leadership under the academisation programme, and the corresponding attenuation of LA oversight and democratic accountability, created structural preconditions for precisely the kind of normative consolidation that the NC maps reveal. The concentrated authority of Trust executives and the institutional legitimacy of managerial data regimes belong to the SEPs whose consequences are here specified at the meso level through norm circles (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Ball, 2018).

9.3.1 Norm circles in Matson Academy

The configuration of Matson Academy's norm circles points to a tightly coupled, leadership-dominated normative climate. Figure 9.2 shows how the senior leadership team (SLT), together with Trust executives, formed a dominant norm circle that set strong expectations around the centrality of data in everyday practice. This circle endorsed norms of full compliance with platform metrics and the performative use of data systems, reinforcing them through both formal monitoring and subtler managerial pressure. Heads of Department and some teacher peer groups aligned with these leadership norms, creating overlapping circles of endorsement that carried a consistent message: a 'good' teacher was one who used platforms diligently and in line with SLT-defined targets. The alignment was dense: membership was extensive, and endorsement frequent enough, for normative pressure to travel downwards through the school. Teachers encountered not only top-down directives but repeated reminders from peers and middle leaders that compliance

constituted the expected baseline. Crucially, many teachers also came to internalise these expectations as markers of their own professional legitimacy, aligning their conduct with platform demands because doing so offered reassurance within a visible and judged environment. In Foucauldian terms, this internal alignment constitutes forms of subjectivation. Teachers were partly driven by the perceived personal benefits of conformity to the external gaze.

The normative power at Matson Academy (Figure 9.2) is reproduced through a dense configuration of overlapping NCs, rather than enacted solely through formal hierarchy or policy. Digital platforms and management information systems are therefore rendered normatively consequential even in the absence of continuous, explicit enforcement, as expectations become embedded within routinised practices and peer interactions. The dominant NC, comprising the Senior Leadership Team and Trust executives, occupies the upper centre and provides the primary source of downward normative causation, defining what counts as legitimate practice. Two mediating NCs, the Heads of Department and the ICT Department/Trust IT Manager, translate and extend these expectations. Heads of Department operationalise leadership directives within departmental contexts, while the ICT function stabilises and disseminates them through staff support and the monitoring of compliance. Within this field of influence, multiple conformist teacher NCs cluster tightly, indicating the significance of horizontal normative power. Compliance is reinforced through peer endorsement, visibility and routine enactment, such that alignment with SLT- and ICT-framed expectations becomes socially and professionally normalised. By contrast, resistant teacher circles are fewer in number and positioned at the margins of the map. Their relative isolation reflects the constraining effects of a saturated normative environment, compounded by the absence of communal staff spaces, within which counter-normative practices are contained and largely limited to individualised or low-level forms of discretion. This study introduces the analytic concept of the ‘zone of normative saturation’ to designate the area in which downward normative pressures converge most intensely. It builds on Elder-Vass’s account of how strongly integrated circles generate powerful normative effects (Elder-Vass, 2010) to capture the near-total normative enclosure produced by this configuration, within which alternative practices remain possible but are systematically marginalised.

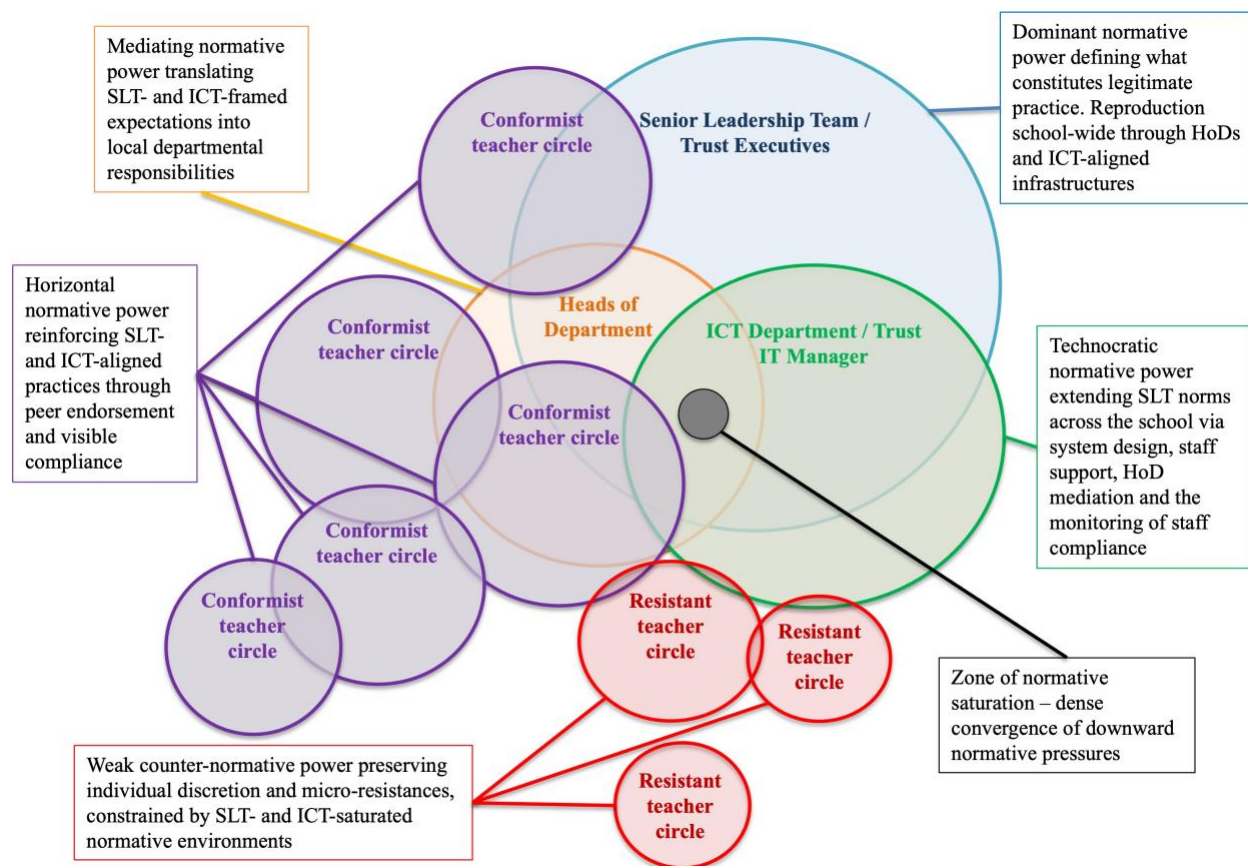


Figure 9.2: Norm circle map – Matson Academy.

Detailed elaboration of the individual norm circles, their associated norms, mechanisms of endorsement and effects on teacher agency is provided in Appendix K (Table K1).

These overlapping norm circles intensified downward causation (Archer, 1995). SLT expectations were internalised not simply because they were formally articulated but because they were echoed and legitimised at several levels of the school's social organisation. In Elder-Vass's (2010, 2012) terms, the leadership circle in Matson Academy exercised considerable causal power as a normative mechanism: its members collectively endorsed the norm of exhaustive platform use and sanctioned deviation, thereby making that norm materially consequential in everyday work.

Teachers therefore complied with data-driven routines partly because policy required it, and partly because non-compliance carried reputational risk and invited subtle reproach. Archer's notion of a situational logic of conformity is useful here (Archer, 1995; 2000b). At T₁, Matson Academy entered the period with an established MAT ethos and stable leadership committed to data-driven management. This generated a situational logic that pushed towards conformity. By T₂–T₃, most teachers reflexively concluded that the safest and most sensible course was to align with dominant

expectations. The limited forms of resistance that did emerge remained largely covert and fragmented. Notably, the relative absence of alternative norm circles endorsing different professional values, such as discussions around teacher autonomy or specific school policies, meant that there was no organised normative counterweight. Resistance was therefore individualised by default.

Smaller resistant norm circles did exist, for example where sceptical teachers confided in trusted colleagues, but they lacked normative density. They were too isolated and weakly connected to counteract the wider compliance norm, and deviance from the data regime tended to remain individualised, confined to friendship groups and too muted to generate collective momentum.

9.3.2 Norm circles in Larwood School

The mapped configuration in Larwood School looks markedly different. Rather than a tightly aligned normative order, the pattern is more plural and teacher-mediated. Figure 9.3 shows that the school's senior leadership, comprising the Principal and SLT, formed only one norm circle among several, and its influence over everyday practice was comparatively limited. Frequent leadership turnover and the external oversight of the Local Authority (LA) meant that digital initiatives were articulated inconsistently and enforced unevenly. The LA, while formally part of the governance structure, functioned primarily as an external norm circle concerned with statutory compliance and specific procurement procedures. It imposed certain structural constraints, such as mandating particular systems, but did not generate a coherent internal norm governing how teachers ought to engage with platforms in daily work.

Within the school, several teacher-led norm circles emerged, often organised through departments or informal relational groupings, which endorsed norms of discretion and selective platform use. In a number of departments, teachers tacitly agreed that data tools should support rather than dictate pedagogy. Pragmatic compliance was valued: systems were used to meet minimum requirements, while classroom autonomy remained worth defending. Teachers openly shared sceptical views about platforms and validated each other's moderate use or creative circumvention of digital mandates. These interactions, often taking place in staffrooms and informal conversation, acted as a counterweight to leadership expectations.

Normative power at Larwood School (Figure 9.3) is dispersed across a set of loosely coupled NCs, rather than consolidated within a single, authoritative centre. The Senior Leadership Team/Principal circle occupies a formally dominant position, yet is weakened by leadership turnover and inconsistent enforcement; its capacity to generate sustained downward causation is therefore limited and intermittent. Alongside this, the Local Authority operates as an external structural-procedural norm circle, shaping procurement and statutory compliance while exerting only minimal day-to-day normative force on teachers. The ICT Department/IT Manager is

positioned as a support-oriented, technocratic actor whose influence is advisory and enabling rather than disciplinary. In contrast to Matson Academy, compliant and resistant teacher NCs coexist in relatively even proportion. Subject departments, particularly those characterised as autonomous, function as distinct NCs that define locally legitimate digital practices through peer deliberation and forms of self-governance, often diluting or refracting senior leadership initiatives. Central to this configuration is the emergence of a large resistant teacher norm circle, visually and analytically prominent in the lower half of the figure. Its scale reflects not only the number of teachers aligned with selective or non-compliant practices, but also the density of horizontal interaction that sustains it. The central staffroom operates here as a key spatio-material site of norm reinforcement: a relational space, in Frelin and Grannäs's (2014) terms, where open discussion, shared scepticism, and mutual validation legitimise 'just enough' compliance and, at times, more explicit forms of resistance. Through these routine interactions, non-compliance acquires shared meaning and social legitimacy, enabling forms of upward causation that are more pronounced than in Matson Academy. The annotated 'zone of normative dispersal', introduced here as a contrasting analytic, captures this condition of weak alignment between NCs, within which competing expectations coexist without resolution. Normative pressure travels laterally and upwards as much as downwards, producing a fragmented and, at times, contradictory governance environment. The contrast with Figure 9.2 is clear: where normative power at Matson Academy appeared dense and convergent, at Larwood School it is plural, decentralised and diffuse in its effects.

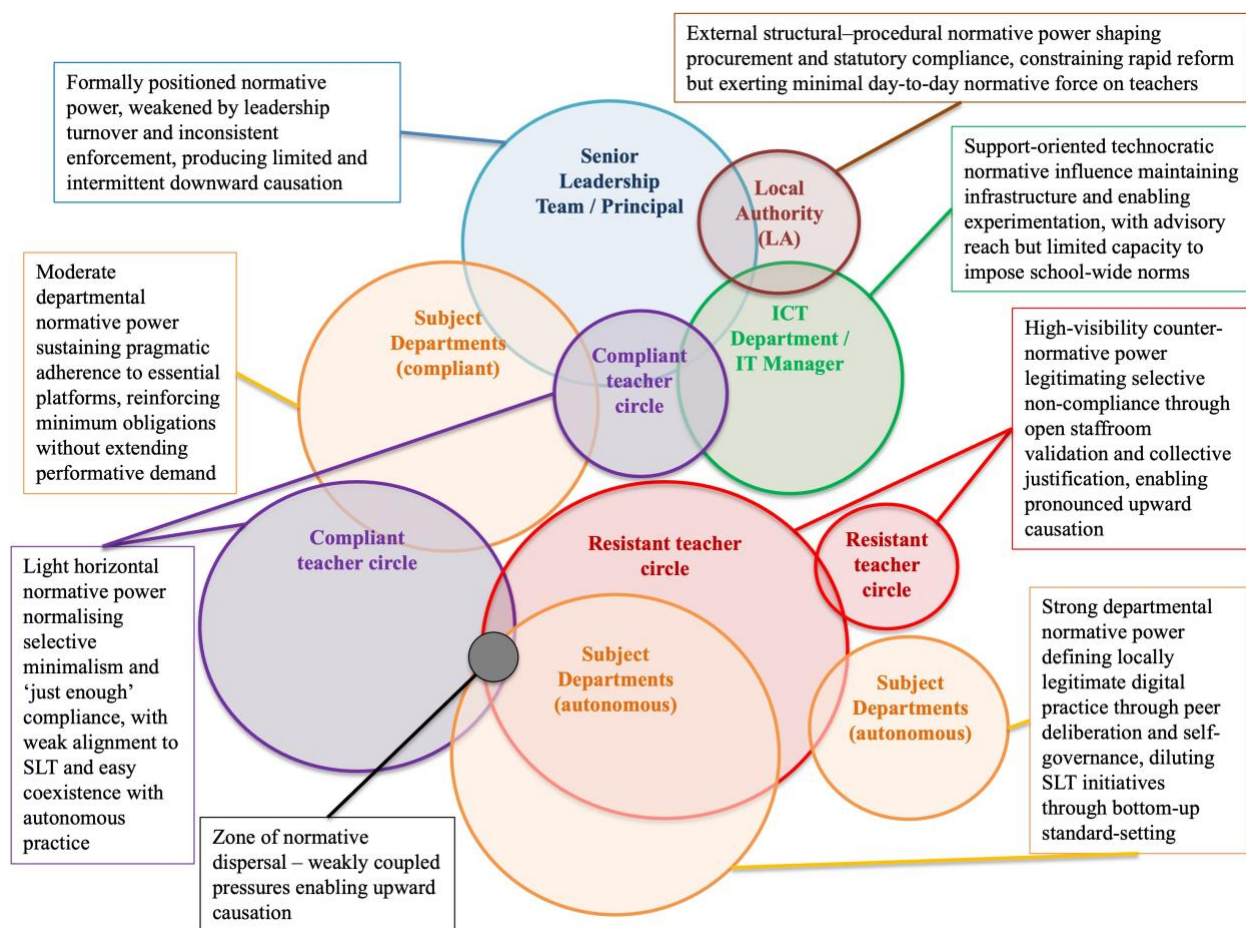


Figure 9.3: Norm circle map – Larwood School.

Detailed elaboration of the individual norm circles, their associated norms, mechanisms of endorsement and effects on teacher agency is provided in Appendix K (Table K2).

No single norm circle dominated in Larwood School. The cultural environment was instead characterised by several overlapping circles, departmental, informal relational and leadership-based, none of which fully displaced the others. This looseness allowed significant upward causation from staff at lower hierarchical levels. Teachers' shared interpretations of platform use often filtered upwards and shaped what was actually done, tempering the reach of official policy. Norms originating in teacher circles, for example prioritising lesson planning over data-entry targets, sometimes gained enough acceptance to weaken attempts by senior leaders to impose stricter compliance.

This pattern also reflects what Orlikowski's (2000) practice-based account of technology describes as the social configuration of technology use post-implementation: platforms do not arrive with

fixed governance effects determined by their designers but are appropriated, reinterpreted and sometimes redirected by the social groupings into which they are introduced. Larwood School illustrates this clearly. The same Google Classroom system used elsewhere as an accountability mechanism was configured here primarily as a teaching resource, its capacity to support evaluation remaining largely dormant. This is an important corrective to deterministic readings of platform governance, reinforcing the argument that the consequences of platformisation are socially and organisationally mediated.

In Elder-Vass's (2010) terms, the normative power of these teacher circles was comparatively strong. Through mutual endorsement, they conferred legitimacy on partial compliance and subtle resistance, such that teachers could openly acknowledge bending reporting rules in favour of student needs, and colleagues would respond with recognition rather than censure.

Archer's (1995) morphogenetic lens suggests that this pattern tended more towards morphostasis than full morphogenesis. At T_1 , a pre-existing relational culture and fragmented authority structure generated a situational logic of protection. At T_2 – T_3 , teachers collectively sought to preserve valued practices in the face of externally driven change. Leadership lacked the sustained and unified pressure necessary to consolidate a new normative order, a weakness compounded by turnover and the moderate force of LA oversight. As a result, many platform-related changes stalled or were only partially adopted, with staff norm circles moderating and at times quietly deflecting the push towards comprehensive digital reorganisation. This outcome might be characterised as the relative success of community and pedagogic governance over administrative governance: teachers sustained their professional norms not by blocking change entirely but by ensuring that its terms remained negotiable. This resonates with the literature on New Public Management and audit culture, which notes that accountability pressures do not invariably produce compliance but frequently generate adaptive and locally rationalised forms of accommodation (Power, 1994; Ball, 2003).

Larwood School's plural norm circles enabled a greater degree of agency in relation to platform governance. This agency was exercised through selective adoption and negotiation rather than outright refusal, but it was nevertheless sufficient to prevent a complete top-down redefinition of practice.

9.3.3 Emergent comparative norm circle insights

The contrast between Matson Academy and Larwood School shows how the density, alignment and clustering of norm circles can produce markedly different organisational outcomes. In Matson Academy, a high-density, hierarchical network of norm circles aligned with institutional authority generated a comparatively uniform normative climate, in which platform-driven managerial norms penetrated deeply. In Larwood School, norm circles were more diffuse and loosely coupled,

producing greater variation in how teachers responded. The comparison reinforces a basic critical realist point that is directly relevant to the thesis's core argument about digital platform governance: the effects of structural innovations such as digital platforms are mediated by cultural and relational mechanisms. Neither technology nor formal policy alone determines compliance or resistance; what matters is how these elements are activated through social relations within particular settings (Bhaskar, 2005[1979]; Archer, 1995; Elder-Vass, 2010).

Elder-Vass's (2010, 2012) concept of norm circles is especially useful here because it provides a meso-level explanation for why two schools facing broadly similar external pressures produced divergent practices. In theoretical terms, Matson Academy shows norm circles operating as mechanisms of normative closure, amplifying managerial power and reinforcing a tightly governed climate. Larwood School, by contrast, shows norm circles functioning more as a buffer and filter, sustaining local autonomy and moderating the reach of managerial expectations.

By visualising and mapping these normative networks, the analysis moves beyond describing what happened to explaining how and why it happened in each case. The NC maps (Figures 9.2 and 9.3) work as an analytic device linking structure and agency. They show how collective endorsement and sanction translated structural conditions into everyday practice: teachers' responses were neither purely individual choices nor simply the direct effects of policy, but emerged from the interaction between structural forces and culturally sustained group norms.

This insight extends Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach by making explicit a cultural mechanism of normative regulation that her original model implied but did not elaborate. It also addresses concerns about reification by grounding cultural causation in the ongoing practices of specific social groups rather than treating norms as autonomous forces. At the same time, it adds nuance to accounts of digital-era governmentality in schools by positioning norm circles as part of the subtle social processes through which platform expectations are normalised, negotiated or resisted (Ball, 2003; Williamson, 2017b). In methodological terms, the NC maps offer a device that could travel to other educational and organisational settings where digital governance produces divergent outcomes despite similar structural pressures. For example, in multi-site academy trusts, hospital trusts or public sector organisations, such as local councils, that are subject to NPM-driven datafication. By foregrounding the role of norm circles in mediating platform use and teacher agency, the analysis clarifies why the two schools diverged and provides a basis for the more detailed theoretical discussion that follows.

9.3.4 Emergent norm circle configurations and normative climates

Considered together, the configurations mapped in Figures 9.2 and 9.3 suggest that the two schools exhibited contrasting normative climates, generated by differences in the alignment and relational coupling of their respective norm circles. In Matson Academy, norm circles were tightly integrated

and strongly aligned with institutional authority. Senior leadership expectations were amplified through Heads of Department and the primacy afforded to ICT, then further stabilised through peer endorsement within conformist teacher circles. The result was a condition of normative saturation; a term used here as an analytic descriptor to capture conditions in which leadership-defined expectations concerning platform use and performative professionalism acquire the status of taken-for-granted practice. Dense connectivity between dominant circles generated strong downward causation, shaping what counted as legitimate conduct and narrowing the range of reflexively imaginable alternatives.

This configuration reflects the operation of powerful cultural emergent properties. In Elder-Vass's (2010, 2012) terms, the dominant norm circles in Matson Academy operated as mechanisms of normative closure, sustaining platform-driven expectations through collective endorsement and sanction. SEPs and CEPs at T_1 – including MAT autonomy, leadership stability and established platform infrastructures – generated a situational logic of conformity that conditioned teachers' internal conversations, leaving resistant circles too small and weakly connected to generate meaningful upward causation.

In Larwood School, by contrast, norm circles were loosely coupled and only weakly aligned with senior leadership. Leadership and LA-related circles exerted intermittent and limited downward pressure, while departmental and teacher-led circles played a stronger role in defining what counted as locally legitimate practice. The resulting condition could best be understood as normative dispersal: multiple normative logics coexisted, and no single circle was able to impose a unified definition of appropriate platform use. This looseness created greater scope for upward causation, as teacher and departmental norms shaped how platforms were interpreted, selectively adopted or quietly bypassed.

Archer's morphogenetic framework suggests this pattern tended more towards morphostasis than transformation. At T_1 , Larwood School's relational culture and histories of discretion generated a situational logic of protection, orienting teachers towards the preservation of valued practices associated with LA oversight, such as curriculum autonomy and established working conditions. Yet this same oversight, compounded by leadership turnover, weakened the conditions needed for sustained downward causation and limited the consolidation of platform-driven norms.

Comparatively, these configurations show that the consequences of platformisation cannot be inferred from technological properties or policy mandates alone. They depend on how structural conditions intersect with culturally sustained norm circles and relational patterns of endorsement. The NC maps therefore operate as an explanatory device, showing how similar external pressures produced divergent outcomes through contrasting normative architectures and providing the analytical backdrop to the emergent T_4 outcomes examined in the following sections.

9.4 Digital platforms and managerial oversight

This section develops the thesis's contribution to debates on NPM-driven governance and platform power, examined in Chapters 2 and 3, by showing how the NC configurations mapped in Section 9.2 determine whether digital infrastructures consolidate into instruments of managerial control or remain open to reinterpretation. Building on the discussion of saturation and dispersal in Figures 9.2 and 9.3, it examines how digital platforms become woven into school governance and, in doing so, reshape managerial oversight. It draws on material from Themes 2 and 3 in Chapter 6, which examined platform adoption and efficiency discourses and intensified surveillance and datafication as mechanisms of staff control at Matson Academy, and from Themes 1, 2 and 5 in Chapter 7, which examined leadership instability and post-pandemic managerial restructuring, governance structures and the role of local authority oversight, and platform instability, change fatigue and teacher resistance at Larwood School. Rather than treating platforms as neutral tools, the discussion approaches them as digital infrastructures whose organisational effects depend on how their affordances are activated within particular structural and normative environments. That question of activation is itself the central argument of the section: the same platform architecture can intensify or leave largely dormant the governance effects for which it was technically designed, depending on whether structural and cultural conditions mobilise its capacities.

Both schools used SIMS and Go4Schools. Matson Academy relied principally on Satchel One, used for homework management, assessment tracking and the generation of teacher-level compliance dashboards, while Larwood School used Google Classroom more extensively, primarily for lesson resource distribution, assignment management and asynchronous communication with pupils. The critical difference lay not in technical capability but in governance integration: at Matson Academy, platform data were embedded in formal performance management processes, generating direct accountability consequences for individual teachers; at Larwood School, similar data capabilities remained largely disconnected from teacher evaluation and were interpreted as supplementary tools. Whether Matson Academy had a documented unified digital strategy, understood as a formal policy linking platform use to accountability frameworks, was not directly confirmed in the interview data, though leaders' consistent references to Trust-wide data expectations and dashboard-based oversight suggest that such expectations were at minimum operationally entrenched even if not always formally codified.

Platform governance was closely aligned with the centralised MAT administrative structure at Matson Academy. Platform use formed an explicit part of teachers' everyday responsibilities and was embedded in routine organisational procedures. Systems such as Go4Schools and Satchel One were incorporated into a data infrastructure that enabled Trust leaders to monitor attendance, behaviour logs and assessment entries across schools in near real time. Centralised dashboards made possible a form of remote oversight, what Ball (1998:123) calls 'steering at a distance', and supported comparative monitoring across departments and schools. The significance of these

systems lay not simply in expanding managerial visibility but in making that visibility consequential. Everyday classroom activity was translated into comparable data points, allowing continuous monitoring aligned with the performance logics associated with New Public Management (NPM); the suite of audit-based, output-oriented governance reforms that have restructured English schooling since the late 1980s (Hood, 1991; Power, 1994; Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2006). Through these arrangements, digital infrastructures supported an environment of ongoing visibility, benchmarking and standardised accountability. This is consistent with Clarke and Newman's (1997) account of the NPM restructuring of public services, in which managerial authority is reasserted through audit mechanisms and targets rather than through direct professional supervision. It is also consistent with Ball's (2003) argument that performativity reconstitutes professional identity around measurable outputs, displacing collegial forms of legitimacy.

The picture Larwood School presents is more fragmented. As an LA-maintained school, it lacked a unified digital strategy linking platform use directly to managerial oversight. Google Classroom was widely used for lesson delivery and resource sharing, yet its role in formal accountability remained limited. SIMS functioned mainly as an administrative system for timetabling and pupil records, while Go4Schools was used for assessment tracking. Heads of Department retained considerable discretion over how digital data were interpreted and used, and in several cases paper-based monitoring practices persisted alongside digital systems. This pattern is consistent with what critical platform studies literature identifies as institutional drift: a condition in which platforms are piloted, adapted or abandoned without becoming fully embedded within governance structures (Decuypere, Grimaldi and Landri, 2021; Nichols and Dixon-Román, 2024). The drift concept connects directly to debates in the digital governance literature about the conditions under which ICT investment produces durable organisational change as opposed to surface-level adoption that leaves underlying power relations largely intact (Williamson, 2017b). Larwood School's repeated platform transitions, and its staff's accumulated scepticism about extensive data entry, illustrate the latter trajectory. Read against the labour process literature set out in Chapter 2, the contrast is instructive: Matson's trajectory resembles a movement from responsible autonomy towards technical and digitally Taylorised control (Friedman, 1977; Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011), whereas at Larwood that movement remained incomplete, stalled by the very drift described above.

The absence of a strongly coordinated digital policy at Larwood School allowed teachers greater latitude in how platforms were incorporated into everyday work. This preserved a degree of autonomy but also meant that potentially useful innovations often remained local to departments rather than spreading across the wider school (Kerssens and van Dijck, 2022). At the time of the fieldwork, the proposed move to the integrated Arbor management information system suggested the possibility of a more unified digital infrastructure. Were such a system to be fully implemented, it could strengthen the organisational centrality of platform data and narrow the governance gap observed between the two schools (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3).

A morphogenetic perspective helps clarify where these differences come from. They reflect contrasting SEPs, comprising centralised and decentralised governance frameworks shaped by the schools' legal designations, and contrasting CEPs, including prevailing norms around autonomy and surveillance. Archer (1995:177) defines SEPs as 'those internal and necessary relationships which entail material resources, whether physical or human, and which generate causal powers proper to the relation itself', adding that 'all structural influences are mediated to people by shaping the situations in which they find themselves' (1995:196). Structure sets the conditions, but those conditions matter only as they are encountered and acted upon by situated actors. To paraphrase Marx (2023[1852]), teachers make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing. The relational dynamic here is therefore not one of simple technological determinism: platforms shape managerial oversight, but managerial oversight also configures how platforms are deployed, what data are extracted and what consequences follow. SEPs and CEPs do equivalent analytic work in specifying the prior structural and cultural context within which this mutual shaping takes place.

Elder-Vass (2010:16) describes entities as 'objects or things', noting that senior leadership teams in academy schools can operate as quasi-corporate entities with weak external constraint, allowing decisive and at times unilateral platform implementation at organisational level. At the same time, Archer reminds us that 'no conditional influence works as a hydraulic pressure, but is subject to reflexive (if still fallible) evaluation by agents who weigh it against their other concerns' (1995:184).²¹

Elder-Vass's (2010) concept of norm circles provides further analytical leverage by explaining how shared expectations around platform use were generated, sustained and enforced. He defines a norm circle as 'an entity whose parts are the people who are committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular norm' (Elder-Vass, 2010:195), stressing that such circles have emergent causal powers: they persist beyond the actions of particular individuals and shape behaviour through ongoing mutual reinforcement.

The NPM-oriented senior leadership team in Matson Academy formed the dominant norm circle, establishing and reproducing compliance norms through formal directives, policy frameworks and performance management, but also through informal pressures that framed compliance as a marker of legitimacy. Norm circles, as Elder-Vass notes, 'reward those who enact [the norm], by criticising or punishing those who fail to enact it, or even just by ostentatiously enacting it themselves' (2010:124). In this setting, the reward was symbolic legitimacy and managerial

²¹ By *hydraulic pressure*, Archer (1995) refers to a deterministic model of causation in which structural influences are assumed to operate automatically and irresistibly. She rejects this view, arguing instead that structural and cultural conditions exert conditional influences that are always mediated through agents' reflexive deliberations and concerns.

approval; the sanction was reputational damage and public exposure through the circulated data ‘health’ report. Teachers are highly alert to their standing within peer groupings and, as Elder-Vass observes, ‘a consequence of being members of a norm circle... [is that] individuals act differently than they would do otherwise’ (2010:124). The high visibility and traceability of platform data intensified those pressures, leaving limited room for discretion.

Larwood School looked different. Multiple norm circles, departmental, cross-departmental and leadership-led, coexisted, each carrying different expectations about platform compliance. This plurality weakened the overall normative force and enabled teachers to meet some requirements while selectively ignoring or reinterpreting others. Although members of a norm circle ‘know that they face a systematic incentive to enact the practice’ (Elder-Vass, 2010:124), the presence of competing circles diluted those incentives and created space for discretion. As Elder-Vass also cautions, norm circles can be reconfigured through organisational change. Here, the planned move to Arbor risked consolidating previously diverse circles into a more singular compliance-oriented formation, thereby reducing the conditions that had enabled selective engagement.

The norm circle concept therefore does more than describe micro-social dynamics. It connects directly to the empirical findings in Chapter 8 concerning the ways governance shifts and platform transitions recalibrated the scope for teacher autonomy. These patterns resonate with Foucault’s (1977:184) observation that ‘the power of normalisation imposes homogeneity.’ Norm circles can be understood as the micro-social channels through which managerial expectations become embedded in routine practice, allowing institutional priorities to be realised without constant direct intervention.

The complementarity of critical realism and governmentality is most visible at this point. Elder-Vass’s account of how norm circles reward conformity and sanction deviation helps explain the micro-mechanisms through which platform compliance becomes built into everyday practice. At the same time, those mechanisms resonate with Foucault’s claim that modern governance often works through the internalisation of norms, producing self-regulating subjects whose conduct aligns with institutional priorities without continuous external supervision (Burchell et al., 1991). Norm circles form part of the social architecture through which governmental rationalities are reproduced. Viewed through this lens, the specific Foucauldian processes at work are: disciplinary power, operating through platform dashboards and audit trails that maintain teacher visibility; calculative practices, through which classroom activity is translated into comparable, manageable data; and subjectivation, through which teachers come to understand themselves as self-monitoring data producers responsible for the accuracy and timeliness of their own performance records.

Disciplinary power operated through sustained visibility at Matson Academy. Platform dashboards, traffic-light indicators and automated alerts functioned as techniques of normalisation, drawing attention to deviation from prescribed standards. By embedding oversight in calculative

practices, the MAT materialised its policy priorities within the platform infrastructure itself (Hayes, Introna and Kelly, 2018). This is consistent with van Dijck, Poell and de Waal's (2018:4) definition of an online platform as a 'programmable digital architecture designed to organise interactions between users.' Neoliberal governmentality was evident in the responsabilisation of teachers as self-monitoring actors, expected to maintain the accuracy and timeliness of their own data in order to avoid intervention (Ball, 2016). This statement reflects Foucault's (1977) view of power as productive as well as repressive: platforms not only constrained behaviour but shaped the anticipatory self-monitoring that teachers came to undertake. It also echoes Williamson's (2017b) argument that the platformisation of education is propelled by neoliberal agendas of efficiency and solutionism, recasting governance problems as technical ones. This perspective has been well developed in information systems research since the late 2000s, where scholars have examined how enterprise systems reshape professional identity and organisational accountability through the imposition of standardised, comparative metrics (Hayes et al., 2018). Matson Academy shows how those dynamics play out in a school context: pedagogical values become entangled with performance metrics, and governance is exercised through the affordances and constraints of digital architectures (van Dijck and Poell, 2018).

In Larwood School, disciplinary mechanisms were less overt, but neoliberal rationalities remained discernible. Teachers were encouraged to own their data and use platform analytics to reflect on their practice. Presented as empowerment, this framing also carried the latent possibility of more intensive surveillance once Arbor was implemented (Zuboff, 2019). Even in a looser setting, managerial oversight could therefore operate in anticipatory ways, shaping expectations before formal controls were fully in place. Leadership turbulence and the loose coupling of accountability to data metrics created an environment conducive to greater local agency. This relative autonomy was less the product of intentional design than of the absence of strong central coordination (Baxter, 2016). The interview data suggest that this decentralisation had both enabling and constraining effects. On the one hand, it afforded a degree of freedom reminiscent of earlier forms of teacher autonomy discussed in Chapter 2 (Gleeson and Gunter, 2001). On the other, it reflected what Kerssens and van Dijck (2021:251) describe as a 'precarious reshuffling of corporate and public forces' in platform adoption, where weak coordination generates incoherent practice and institutional vulnerability. This underlines the need to conceptualise platformisation as a dynamic and uneven process rather than as a single developmental trajectory.

The core argument of this section is that platform governance does not arise automatically from the deployment of digital systems. It is an emergent outcome of the interaction between structural, cultural and agential conditions that vary considerably across settings. This helps explain why platforms reinforced a pervasive regime of managerial control at Matson Academy while operating within a looser and potentially transitional environment at Larwood School. Where a strong managerial regime already exists, platforms tend to amplify that power by making surveillance seamless and hierarchical control routine. Where governance is unstable or pluralistic, as in

Larwood School, platforms do not cohere into a single regime but remain subject to teachers' discretionary use, allowing pockets of autonomy to persist.

These differences underline the need to situate platform power within context. The same technology can yield morphostatic outcomes in one setting, reinforcing an existing top-down order, and more morphogenetic possibilities in another, where the absence of centralised control permits socially negotiated change. As Chapter 8 argued, the MAT school exhibited surveillance-centred morphostasis, whereas the LA school displayed a predominantly morphostatic trajectory of institutional drift within which, however, relational and localised forms of agential negotiation produced modest adjustments to how platforms were enacted. In Archer's (1995) terms, Matson Academy's pre-existing centralisation at T_1 conditioned an outcome at T_4 that largely reproduced the status quo, while Larwood School's more diffuse starting point enabled greater experimentation during T_2 – T_3 and a limited elaboration of practice at T_4 . How much scope teachers retained for reflexive agency, and what forms that took, was itself a product of the NC configurations established in Section 9.2: the density of normative alignment in Matson Academy narrowed the range of viable responses, whilst the dispersal of normative authority at Larwood School preserved greater room for reflexivity to operate. Section 9.4 examines these dynamics directly.

An integrated theoretical summary of these interpretations is provided in Appendix L.

9.5 Teacher autonomy and reflexive agency

The literature on teacher autonomy reviewed in Chapter 2 charts a trajectory from relative discretion to controlled and productive forms of compliance, raising the question of what reflexive space teachers retain within platformised governance environments. This section revisits that question at a theoretical level, examining how NC-conditioned situational logics shape the forms of reflexive deliberation available to teachers under different organisational conditions. If platform governance names the configuration through which digital oversight acquires force, teacher agency remains central to how that force is received, negotiated and, at times, unsettled. This section revisits, at a more conceptual level, the empirical themes concerning teacher workload, emotional toll and agency in tension developed in Theme 5 of Chapter 6 and Themes 1 and 5 of Chapter 7; leadership instability and post-pandemic managerial restructuring; and platform instability, change fatigue and teacher resistance. The question is not whether governance displaces agency but how reflexive deliberation shapes teachers' responses to platform-based expectations under different organisational conditions. It is through this examination of reflexive agency that the thesis makes its contribution to governance-within-governance analysis: showing not just how digital platforms reconfigure managerial authority at the organisational level, but how that authority is processed by situated actors navigating competing concerns.

Autonomy is not treated here as a fixed attribute that is simply present or absent. It is understood as a situated and relational outcome of structural conditions and reflexive deliberation, mediated through cultural norms (Archer, 2003). In both schools, digital platforms structured the conditions under which autonomy could be exercised. The incorporation of platforms into formal performance management in Matson Academy created a tight link between compliance with platform protocols and judgments about competence. Autonomy was therefore often exercised within narrow limits, for example in finding quicker ways to meet data-entry expectations rather than questioning their necessity (see Chapter 6, Section 6.4). The weaker link between platform use and formal accountability in Larwood School allowed greater scope for selective engagement, such as using Google Classroom primarily for teaching rather than monitoring. Even there, however, autonomy was never absolute; departmental leaders could still require particular forms of platform use, especially around assessment and reporting.

The patterns observed across the two schools correspond closely to the phases of teacher autonomy described in Chapter 2. The controlled autonomy identified by Gleeson and Gunter (2001) as characteristic of the post-1988 period, in which teachers retained responsibility for classroom practice within increasingly circumscribed national expectations, finds a direct contemporary expression in Matson Academy's compliance-oriented regime: autonomy persists, but only within the narrow space left by platform-defined performance criteria. The productive autonomy associated with the late NPM period, in which teachers were encouraged to demonstrate initiative and self-management while aligning their practice with organisational goals (Ball, 2003; Beck, 2008), is more recognisable in Larwood School's looser setting, where teachers exercised selective judgment about platform use without facing the same evaluative consequences. The trajectory from controlled to productive autonomy was, however, never linear; the platformisation of the post-pandemic period introduced new forms of visibility that, as the preceding chapters show, recalibrated both the meaning and the limits of teacher discretion in context-specific ways. What appears as professional autonomy at Larwood School is, in part, a by-product of governance fragmentation rather than a principled institutional commitment to teacher judgment, a distinction that Helsby's (1999) observation about the contested and unstable character of teacher professionalism in England anticipates.

Archer's (1995) morphogenetic framework is especially useful here. Structural and cultural conditions, such as platform policies or norms of surveillance, pre-date action, but they shape outcomes only through agents' reflexive deliberations about their concerns and projects. Teachers' internal conversations, 'the mode of articulation between people and reality' (Archer, 2003:306), play a crucial role in shaping responses to the pressures and possibilities of data-driven systems.²²

²² Archer's notion of reflexivity as an 'internal conversation' can be read as broadly analogous to Charles S. Peirce's idea of an 'inner dialogue' (cited in Crick and Bodie, 2016), although Archer develops this concept within a distinctively sociological and critical realist framework rather than a semiotic one.

In both schools, teachers were acutely aware of what platforms demanded and engaged in continual reflection about how to respond. This reflexivity appeared empirically in a wide range of tactics, from overt opposition to strategic compliance to quiet subversion, each representing a situated orientation towards the datafication of work.

At T₁, both schools inherited structural and cultural conditions that shaped the initial field of possible action. Teachers then navigated those conditions through their own reflexive deliberations, influenced in turn by the norm circles within which they were located, at T₂–T₃, producing different ways of interpreting and enacting platform demands. In Matson Academy, the strong alignment of SEPs and CEPs in favour of compliance limited the range of viable responses, producing morphostasis in the form of continued centralised oversight. The weaker alignment between decentralised structures and more varied norms in Larwood School created openings for modest morphogenesis, as some departments developed locally adapted practices that diverged from official expectations.

Reflexivity is, according to Archer (2007:4), ‘the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa.’²³ Archer (2003) identifies four modes of reflexivity, each shaping how people deliberate on their concerns and move towards action. Communicative reflexives seek confirmation and clarification through dialogue before deciding. Autonomous reflexives rely more heavily on self-contained internal deliberation, moving quickly from thought to implementation. Meta-reflexives interrogate both their own reasoning and the structural conditions influencing it, often questioning the value and purpose of their actions. Fractured reflexives experience internal conversations marked by uncertainty and disorientation, making coherent action harder to sustain.

Many Matson Academy teachers described modifying their behaviour in anticipation of being monitored. As Chapter 8 showed, staff were highly aware that visibility had displaced trust within the new data regime. Teachers internalised expectations of constant documentation and adjusted their conduct accordingly. Some acknowledged performing tasks primarily for the sake of the data, submitting additional assessments or updating logs not to improve learning but to create the appearance of productivity within the system. These reflexive responses often reinforced the prevailing structure and can be read through Archer’s (1995:74) notion of ‘double morphogenesis’ of structure and agency. By ensuring that their outputs met expected benchmarks, teachers unintentionally reproduced the very performative pressures that constrained them. Their ultimate concerns, such as passing appraisal or securing pay progression, generated projects, such as over-reporting minor activity, that aligned with rather than challenged structural demands. Although some privately questioned the value of these practices, they regarded open resistance as too risky within a Trust strongly committed to compliance.

²³ I acknowledge Archer’s anachronistic use of the term ‘normal’, which reflects the language of its time; in this context, it denotes the cognitive capacity to make decisions.

Elder-Vass's (2010) concept of norm circles helps explain why this dynamic was so powerful. The dominant departmental circles in Matson Academy largely mirrored the expectations set by senior leadership, creating a feedback loop in which the 'good teacher' was imagined as one who met platform targets without hesitation. This culture resonated most strongly with communicative reflexives, who sought reassurance from colleagues before deviating from routine, thereby reinforcing compliance further. The closure or inaccessibility of whole-staff communal spaces following the pandemic sharply reduced the scope for such reflexivity to operate across the school; without informal shared spaces, cross-departmental deliberation diminished, and communicative reflexivity became channelled within compliance-oriented circles rather than challenging them.

This was not, however, the only reflexive pattern at work. A smaller and less visible set of teachers displayed more autonomous or meta-reflexive tendencies. Even within Matson Academy's tightly managed regime, modest forms of manoeuvre were evident. Teachers delayed data uploads until the last permissible moment; ignored initial management requests in the expectation that, as Amy put it, *'if it was really important, someone would ask again'*; and adopted performative strategies when presenting data so as to avoid appearing on reports that flagged incomplete digital tasks, such as recording homework or uploading resources for absent pupils. These teachers either relied on self-contained deliberation or critically examined the conditions underpinning platform use, often questioning the educational value of specific data demands.

Although they rarely engaged in overt defiance, recognising the risks of challenging an assertive leadership culture, they practised selective non-compliance, used discreet workarounds and prioritised classroom integrity over performative data production. Within this more sceptical circle, mutual validation and the quiet exchange of coping strategies formed a subdued counterpoint to the dominant compliance culture, even if its influence on whole-school practice remained limited. For these teachers, non-mandatory platform features or data tasks judged to have little educational value were routinely ignored.

These micro-acts of autonomy allowed teachers to reclaim limited discretion within a time-poor environment without directly confronting managerial authority. Such tactics fit Archer's (1995; 2007) account of constrained agents pursuing their concerns, maintaining high-quality teaching or preserving personal wellbeing, by finding room for manoeuvre within structural boundaries. They also echo Foucault's (1977:135–169) account of 'docile bodies': subjects shaped by surveillance yet still capable of minor resistances. What de Certeau (1984:xix) calls 'victories of the weak over the strong' are not grand acts of refusal but everyday tactics that exploit overlooked gaps in institutional power. Teachers in Matson Academy were outwardly compliant, yet beneath this surface lay a reflexive stance that remained sceptical of, or unreconciled to, the Trust's turn towards datafixation, a term used in this thesis to describe the normalisation of data production as an end in itself rather than as a means of improving professional practice.

This part of the analysis also speaks to wider debates on professionalism and performativity. Helsby (1999:93) argues that teacher professionalism in England has become a ‘contested and unstable category... constantly being redefined... to serve different interests.’ In Matson Academy, this redefinition took a managerial form, organised around NPM targets, audit cultures and visible performance. Teachers’ quiet resistances can therefore be read as attempts to retain fragments of judgment beneath the surface of formal compliance. These actions, often unspoken and internalised, functioned as ‘technologies of the self’, preserving a degree of occupational identity amidst externally imposed priorities (Foucault, 1988a, *passim*). Such subtle dissent highlights the complexity of reflexive agency within high-surveillance settings: teachers operated within a narrow bandwidth of autonomy, responding to platform governance through docile yet deliberate acts of misalignment.

In Larwood School, by contrast, reflexivity was enacted more visibly at the empirical level. Because teachers encountered much less top-down pressure, their internal deliberations translated into a wider range of practices and carried greater morphogenetic potential. Without constant oversight, whether physical or digital, many felt able to use platforms on their own terms. Here reflexivity more often generated creative or resistant projects. One department head recounted that, after the ransomware attack had wiped data, staff collectively reconsidered which forms of data were actually necessary, stripping back onerous tracking routines. Others engaged in selective uptake, adopting tools that supported teaching and ignoring those regarded as ‘pointless box-ticking’. In Archer’s terms, these teachers displayed autonomous reflexivity, setting their own priorities and filtering platform demands through educational values. Some also demonstrated communicative reflexivity, seeking affirmation in the staffroom about which digital tasks were essential and which could quietly be dropped (Caetano, 2015). Because communal spaces were preserved, internal conversations could more readily become external ones, allowing collective sense-making and subtle forms of shared resistance, such as an unspoken agreement among several staff to leave a neglected report incomplete when leadership had overlooked it. Reflexive agency here carried limited morphogenetic potential: local negotiation of platform use reshaped some practices and helped preserve a diversity of teaching approaches resistant to full datafication.

Even in Larwood School, however, limits remained. When a new headteacher arrived from an academy background with a latent mandate to strengthen data ‘accountability’, she moved cautiously in that direction through the planned introduction of Arbor. Many teachers sensed that the organisational gaps allowing individual discretion might soon narrow, which shows again how structural conditions continued to bound the reach of reflexive influence.

Reflexivity was therefore heterogeneous across the two settings. A comparative summary of dominant and minority reflexive modes, associated norm circles, and the conditions enabling or constraining agency in each school is provided in Appendix M.

Hardy's (2019) reading of Archer and Foucault suggests that both theorists, in different ways, work with a tripartite relation between conditions, practices and outcomes. In this study, governance arrangements set the conditions, teacher reflexivity mediated practice, and the result was either reinforcement or partial reworking of governance patterns. The evidence is consistent with that view. In the MAT school, bounded reflexivity within a rigid performance culture generated practices that largely reproduced the governing structure, producing self-disciplined data producers. In the LA school, more expansive reflexivity enabled small bottom-up changes that altered aspects of governance, even if only modestly. This resonates with Archer's claim (1995; 2003) that reflexive deliberation is the mechanism through which agency can sustain or transform structures, and with Foucauldian insights (1977; 1988b) that where power is less absolute there is more room for counter-conduct, active contestation of governing norms. In Larwood School, teachers' willingness to question data mandates in staff meetings, something seldom seen in Matson Academy, can be read in precisely these terms.

The different forms of reflexive agency also point to different power relations and different possibilities for change. In the MAT case, power was more asymmetrical: SEPs and CEPs shaped by a strong surveillance regime and entrenched audit culture left teachers with a narrow bandwidth for agency. This echoes Giroux's (2018:183) claim that the teacher's capacity to act as a 'transformative intellectual' has been curtailed by pressure to become 'technicians to be controlled' (a phrase originally used by Hodkinson, 1998:193). In the LA context, power was more diffuse and therefore more negotiable. A less assertive leadership culture allowed teachers to reclaim a degree of agency. That setting should not be romanticised, however. Its greater freedom was in part a by-product of limited direction and weak strategic coordination rather than a deliberate democratisation of power. Teachers in Larwood School often recognised this themselves, noting that a clearer platform strategy developed with teacher input might have alleviated a chaotic labour process. Reflexive processes therefore contributed not only to resistance and constructive appropriation but also to the recognition of governance gaps. This aligns with Archer's view that reflexive evaluation may lead agents either to reproduce structures or to attempt to alter them, depending on whether they perceive their context as enabling or frustrating their concerns (Archer, 1995; see also Chernilo, 2017, for a secondary account of this dimension of Archer's work). In Larwood School, some teachers used this latitude to innovate, a potentially morphogenetic move, while others simply ignored platforms, maintaining a kind of benign neglect that neither transformed nor fully complied with institutional arrangements.

These findings challenge deterministic accounts in which platform governance necessarily erodes autonomy. Deterministic framings of this kind are not merely a straw man: they are present in the grey literature on educational technology, in policy discourse about digital transformation, and in some strands of platform studies that treat the architecture of digital systems as directly constitutive of organisational outcomes (see, for example, Selwyn, 2022, for a critique of such assumptions;

van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018). The cases here suggest instead that the effects of platforms on autonomy depend on governance structures, cultural norms and teachers' reflexive capacities in combination. In Matson Academy, this interplay narrowed autonomy to compliance within prescribed limits. In Larwood School, it allowed more meaningful discretion, though one that remained fragile and potentially reversible. This underlines the importance of examining autonomy not in abstract terms but as a situated, dynamic outcome of specific structural, cultural and agential configurations. It also resonates with recent work on teacher agency under datafication: Datnow (2020) shows that teachers do not simply implement data-driven instructions but interpret and at times subvert them in light of local knowledge and values. The cases here support that argument. Even under heavy surveillance, teachers found ways to blunt the impact of data demands on classroom priorities; under weaker surveillance they chose selectively when to comply and when to abstain.

The analysis of reflexive agency across the two schools reinforces the broader argument of the chapter. Platform governance in Matson Academy operated as an instrument of managerial oversight, narrowing autonomy through compliance-oriented reflexivity and tightly bound norm circles. More decentralised structures and the continued presence of communal staff spaces in Larwood School created greater room for autonomy and resistance, sustained by more varied norms, though those gains remained contingent and vulnerable to structural change. The surveillance mechanisms examined in Section 9.5 can be read, in part, as the institutional articulation of the normative conditions produced by NC configuration: it is because compliance-oriented circles at Matson Academy legitimised visibility as a marker of professionalism that platform dashboards could acquire the evaluative force they did, whilst the absence of a dominant compliance NC at Larwood School limited the extent to which surveillance metrics were experienced as binding.

9.6 Managerial surveillance, control and performativity

This section develops the surveillance capitalism and audit culture debates established in Chapters 2 and 3 by specifying the mechanisms through which platform-mediated oversight acquires evaluative force in each school. It returns to Theme 4 from Chapter 6 and Themes 1 and 3 from Chapter 7, which traced teachers' experiences of intensified surveillance and datafication as mechanisms of staff control. It represents a central plank of the thesis's contribution: demonstrating that digital platforms in school governance do not merely expand administrative efficiency but function as instruments through which professional identity and conduct are evaluated and compared. The discussion develops a more explicit theoretical account of those experiences by examining how digital platforms reshape managerial surveillance, performative evaluation and disciplinary regulation in each school, drawing on the concepts of calculative practices, disciplinary techniques and subjectivation introduced in Chapter 4.

The embedding of digital platforms within school governance is one of the principal ways in which platform governance is enacted. What matters is not merely that digital systems increase visibility but how that visibility becomes tied to sanction and the routine circulation of expectations. Platforms extend the capacity of leaders to observe and evaluate teachers' work, expanding oversight in ways that align with wider accountability regimes in contemporary education (Ball, 2003; Power, 1994). Across both case-study schools, digital systems contributed to the datafication of teaching by translating varied pedagogical activity into calculable forms. This expansion of calculative practices did more than increase the volume of information available to managers; it altered the criteria through which teaching was recognised and judged. As Jarke and Breiter (2019:4) observe, 'the datafication of education... leads to a redistribution of agency across socio-technical networks'. The language of redistribution here carries an emphasis on power that works less through explicit instruction than through infrastructures that shape what becomes consequential. This framing is compatible with Bhaskar's (2005[1979]) account that causal power is not wholly reducible to network relations but resides in the stratified properties of structures and mechanisms.

These arguments extend the debates on surveillance capitalism and panoptic visibility established in Chapters 2 and 3. Zuboff's (2019) account of how behavioural data are extracted, aggregated and converted into predictive knowledge corresponds to the dashboard architectures of Matson Academy; the panoptic logic described in Chapter 2 (Section 2.4.5) is here specified not as an abstract architectural form but as a lived normative condition, reproduced through NC-endorsed expectations about what data-visible teachers do. Williamson's (2017b) argument that the platformisation of education advances neoliberal agendas of efficiency and solutionism, examined in Chapter 3 (Section 3.7), is similarly confirmed: the systems examined here translated governance problems, how to know whether teachers are performing, into technical ones, how to make performance legible through platform metrics.

These infrastructures did not, however, operate in the same way in the two schools. The effects of platform surveillance were mediated by organisational conditions and normative expectations. Surveillance did not arrive as a straightforward technological imposition. It took shape through the interaction of digital systems, governance arrangements and norm circles within each setting. Platform use in Matson Academy was tightly integrated with performance management, producing a dense environment of managerial visibility oriented towards performative compliance. In Larwood School, platform integration remained far looser. Teachers encountered fewer direct consequences attached to platform metrics, which left greater room for interpretation and negotiation in everyday work.

9.6.1 Platform performativity and the erosion of trust

Ball's (2003) concept of performativity is central to this discussion. Performativity reduces worth to measurable outputs, and digital platforms intensify that dynamic. The dictum that '*if it's not in the system, it didn't happen*' captured the extent to which data came to substitute for trust in Matson Academy. Activities that might once have rested on open dialogue were now conferred status by a digital trace. This transition signalled a substantial erosion of validity in what teachers did beyond the reach of the platform, reinforcing the culture of datafixation identified in Section 9.4 – in which data production becomes an end in itself rather than a means of professional improvement. This is consistent with Ball's (2003) account of how performativity recasts professionalism around demonstrable outputs and with Perryman's (2006) analysis of how inspection cultures produce performative compliance even in its absence.

Power's (1994) account of audit culture offers a broader explanatory frame. The rise of quantification displaces qualitative evaluation and reorganises accountability around evidence that can be captured and compared. Strathern (2000) describes this as the tyranny of transparency: only what is made visible through metrics is accorded value. Platforms materialise that logic by legitimating only those practices that can be datafied, pushing aspects of teaching incompatible with easy measurement to the margins while activities that can be recorded acquire heightened value.

Elder-Vass's (2010) account of norm circles sharpens this analysis further by showing how performative pressures are socially reinforced. Departmental norm circles in Matson Academy actively upheld the conflation of competence with digital compliance. Teachers who lagged in updating the system faced managerial sanction and, more subtly, peer disapproval. Within staff culture, being a '*good teacher*' increasingly meant keeping one's data current and one's indicators '*in the green*' on the Satchel One dashboards. Such norms made resistance costly in both formal and social terms. This is recognisably the dynamic Barker (1993) identified as concertive control: the enforcement of performance norms had migrated, in part, from managers to colleagues, with Satchel One supplying the shared visibility on which such peer regulation depends. These circles supplied the CEPs that sustained performativity as a lived expectation, extending its force beyond policy alone.

This helps explain how SEPs, the MAT governance model and high-stakes accountability arrangements, interacted with CEPs, notably compliance-oriented norm circles, to shape teachers' situational logics. Reflexive deliberation was therefore tightly constrained; conformity to the data regime came to appear as the only viable means of maintaining legitimacy.

9.6.2 Surveillance gaps and negotiated autonomy

The platform infrastructure at Larwood School was not woven into performance management. Google Classroom, for instance, generated analytics on assignment completion and participation, yet these data were not systematically mobilised in teacher evaluation. The logic of measurement was present in the architecture of the system but only partially realised in governance practice. The platform's causal powers existed at the level of the real but were not activated at the level of the actual, because the structural and cultural conditions for their mobilisation were absent; teachers therefore felt freer to reinterpret or ignore certain metrics without fear of sanction.

Rose's (1999) discussion of overlapping rationalities is useful here. Disciplinary techniques were visible in the basic requirement to record attendance and activity, while calculative practices encouraged teachers to monitor aspects of their own work through platform metrics. Together these shaped processes of subjectivation, yet because enforcement was inconsistent, these expectations did not consolidate into a single coherent mandate. Teachers received mixed signals about what it meant to be a 'good' data practitioner, which left greater room to define their own role.

Elder-Vass's framework clarifies this further. Norm circles in Larwood School were multiple and at times competing. Some reinforced managerial expectations around compliance, but others supported alternative understandings of good teaching – privileging creative practice, strong teacher–student relationships or subject expertise over data production. Because no single circle dominated, pressure to comply was diluted, and teachers could meet some requirements while quietly neglecting or reinterpreting others, preserving occupational identities alongside selective engagement with the data regime. In Archer's (2003) terms, many exercised a form of autonomous reflexivity, consciously prioritising pedagogical values or student-centred goals over institutional targets and thereby resisting full immersion in the performative logic.

Bhaskar's (2008a[1975]) causal power metaphor helps locate the enabling conditions here. The structural looseness of Larwood School's LA governance, at the level of the real, limited the extent to which digital surveillance penetrated everyday work. At the level of the actual, this appeared as irregular enforcement and inconsistent follow-up on platform use. At the empirical level, teachers described a greater sense of trust from leadership, more latitude in how systems were used and greater confidence in voicing dissent. These surveillance gaps created what Archer (1995) would call a situational logic of opportunity, enabling reflexive agents to resist, reinterpret or selectively comply rather than simply absorb demands. That relative autonomy, however, remained contingent on the prevailing governance arrangement. Staff were well aware that a policy shift or new system, such as the proposed introduction of Arbor, could quickly tighten oversight and narrow the room for discretion.

9.6.3 Data asymmetry and the one-way gaze

Andrejevic's (2014:1673; *passim*) notion of the 'big data divide' is useful for making sense of the asymmetrical power relations generated by platform data. Those who collect, aggregate and interpret data enjoy epistemic privilege, whereas those who generate the data become objects of knowledge. This asymmetry is by now well established in the critical data studies and surveillance studies literature (Beer, 2019; Zuboff, 2019), and the findings here both confirm and extend it by showing how the asymmetry operates differently depending on governance structure. In both schools, teachers produced large amounts of information about their work and their students but had very little control over how that information was aggregated or interpreted by management.

Senior leaders had access to dashboards and comparative analytics that provided a system-level view of performance, while individual teachers could usually see only the data they themselves had entered. The evaluative gaze was therefore one-way, allowing management to scrutinise staff without teachers being able to look back or fully understand how they were being judged (Beer, 2019). This realises the information panopticon Zuboff (1988) anticipated and which Chapter 2 revisited: as work is informed, the visibility once afforded by shared space is relocated into data infrastructures. In Larwood School, the asymmetry took a different form. Because data entry was uneven and inconsistent, teachers who diligently logged information could appear worse in system comparisons than colleagues who omitted data altogether. A teacher who recorded every behavioural incident or low submission rate might accumulate more negative marks than one who failed to enter such data, thereby skewing comparative judgments. In both settings, data asymmetries disempowered teachers by excluding them from the terms under which their work was represented and assessed.

This asymmetry is not an accidental flaw but a central feature of control. Foucault's work emphasises the inseparability of knowledge and power: those who monopolise the means of observation and analysis also govern the field of judgment (Foucault, 1977). In these schools, leadership's privileged access to the full data picture gave it unilateral authority in defining reality. Elder-Vass's perspective adds that norm circles of managerial authority reinforced this one-way interpretive privilege by normalising the assumption that data interpretation belonged to leadership. Teachers might quietly question the fairness or accuracy of data-driven judgments, but without access to the wider datasets or analytic tools, their capacity to contest those judgments remained structurally constrained.

9.6.4 Resistance and counter-conduct

Despite the strength of these surveillance mechanisms, teachers in both schools found ways to resist. Foucault (1990:95) reminds us that 'where there is power, there is resistance... present

everywhere in the power network.’ It is worth drawing these threads together as a unified theme, because treated within each subsection the forms of resistance appear merely incidental: across Sections 9.2–9.5 they share a common logic of accommodation and tactical deflection, stopping short of open confrontation and shaped in each case by the normative and structural conditions of the two schools.

Resistance in Matson Academy often took the form of what Scott (1990:195) calls ‘everyday resistance’: small acts that subvert rules without openly confronting them. Continuous data production was itself a mechanism of subjectivation: even when platform outputs were rarely reviewed by management, the obligation to produce them shaped teachers’ sense of what legitimate professional conduct required (Foucault, 1977; Zuboff, 2019). Teachers described delaying data entry until the last possible moment, inputting placeholder information or keeping parallel offline records outside the system. One teacher jokingly referred to using a ‘random number generator’ to populate a grade spreadsheet, a facetious gesture that nevertheless captured the perceived absurdity of escalating data demands. These manoeuvres did not challenge the platform regime directly but created small pockets of autonomy within it. They exemplify Archer’s (1995) point that agents always retain some emergent power to act otherwise, even under heavy constraints, though here the prevailing situational logic favoured morphostasis over transformative change.

Weaker enforcement in Larwood School created room for more overt forms of opposition, what Foucault (2007) would describe as counter-conduct: resistance to being governed in a particular way. Teachers could openly question new digital initiatives in staff meetings, union representatives raised concerns about workload and privacy, and collective staff responses at times succeeded in reshaping or delaying onerous mandates. These practices show how alternative norm circles can legitimate pushback and enable a degree of collective agency, producing what might be understood as partial morphogenesis: modest changes, or at least the blocking of further constraints. Yet these gains remained precarious, dependent on the accommodating structural setting. Staff knew that spaces of autonomy could close quickly if conditions changed; for instance, through the introduction of a more data-driven MIS such as Arbor or incorporation into a stricter academy framework.

The presence of resistance therefore highlights the continuing dialectic between structure and agency. Platforms mediated a continual negotiation between compliance, subtle subversion and open contestation; the scope and likely effects of that resistance were shaped by each school’s governance arrangements and normative environment. Where structure and culture jointly reinforced the data regime, as in Matson Academy, resistance tended to be individualised and covert, limiting its wider effects. Where structural and cultural pressures were less tightly aligned, as in Larwood School, resistance could become more collective and visible, carrying greater, though never guaranteed, potential to influence practice. The scope for resistance was shaped, in

the first instance, by the NC configurations that determined whether dissent could be voiced and validated within the social fabric of each school. Section 9.6 examines how those configurations were in turn sustained or undermined by spatio-material conditions: the presence or absence of communal staff spaces, the organisation of physical and digital communication, and the material infrastructure of staff solidarity.

9.7 Spatial and material restructuring of professional life

The literature on managerialism and school organisation reviewed in Chapter 2 says relatively little about the material conditions under which collegial norms are reproduced and sustained. This section addresses that absence by examining how spatial conditions interact with the NC configurations mapped in Section 9.2 to shape whether collegial norm circles can be maintained or are gradually dismantled. Up to this point, the analysis has focused mainly on digital platforms and human agency. One of the study's clearest findings, however, is that material and spatial conditions are bound up with these processes rather than sitting behind them as passive background. Physical layouts, digital systems, staffing arrangements and organisational routines are constitutive of everyday working life. They carry SEPs, such as the distribution and accessibility of space or the visibility capacities of platforms, which interact with CEPs, including norms of collegiality and performative accountability, to shape teachers' situational logics and the scope for morphogenesis or morphostasis (Archer, 1995; Archer and Elder-Vass, 2012).

9.7.1 Isolation effects: architectural and digital coupling in Matson Academy

The post-pandemic reorganisation of staff space at Matson Academy became closely aligned with platform governance, producing a tightly coupled spatial–digital regime. The withdrawal or repurposing of communal staffrooms, alongside the dispersal of teachers into individual classrooms, removed key opportunities for informal, unplanned, cross-departmental meetings, whilst simultaneously redirecting interaction into visible digital records. There are clear historical echoes here of earlier forms of spatial control, from Taylorist workplace design to school architectures intended to limit informal discourse and reinforce hierarchical observation. Both point to the disciplining effects of space (Taylor and Spicer, 2007; Parker and Jeacle, 2019). In critical realist terms, the altered spatial infrastructure functioned as a SEP that conditioned interaction by weakening the relational settings through which collegial norm circles had previously been reproduced.

Foucault's account of disciplinary partitioning helps clarify how spatial ordering can operate as a technique of governance by shaping movement, association and communicative possibility; an effect intensified here through the redirection of interaction into auditable digital media (Foucault,

1977:141–144). This connects to the thesis's core concern with platform governance: the spatial reconfiguration at Matson Academy was not separate from but continuous with the digital governance regime, reinforcing and extending it through the reorganisation of the conditions under which staff could convene.

This reorganisation of space exceeded mere administrative convenience. It reflected a broader rationality that privileged efficiency and visibility over communal infrastructure. Whatever the stated justification, the effect was to narrow the conditions under which the collective voice of staff could be sustained. Labour-process perspectives converge here. By removing unsupervised spaces and embedding digital traceability, management reinforced individualised accountability logics characteristic of NPM performativity (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2006). The erosion of informal staff spaces, combined with the substitution of face-to-face exchange by digital communication, weakened the routines through which teachers share ideas and offer mutual support. Higgins, making a wider argument about democratic life, suggests that neoliberal governance tends to devalue communal space by treating people increasingly as economic actors rather than democratic participants (Higgins, 2025). That wider tendency is visible here in school form.

The fragmentation of teachers into isolated classrooms during breaks and lunch carried further implications when considered through Elder-Vass's (2010) theory of norm circles. In communal staffrooms, norms of collegiality, shared critique and mutual support were renewed daily through the interaction of a broad and heterogeneous group. Once that setting disappeared, smaller and more insular circles emerged – often based on existing friendships – that could sustain solidarity within their own boundaries but were less able to reproduce whole-school norms of shared identity or coordinated resistance, risking the normalisation of compliance within bounded subcultures.

These developments do not need to be explained by strong claims about leadership intent. They are better understood as forms of environmental steering through the arrangement of space and communicative channels. Read through governmentality, the changes worked less through direct command than through the narrowing of the conditions under which staff might meet, talk and reflect together. This aligns with Foucault's account of disciplinary partitioning and the 'political technology of the body', in which 'allotments in space' and 'modalities of housing' become techniques through which power is exercised over conduct (Foucault, 1974: 523; 1977: 141–144). The spatial–digital reconfiguration of Matson Academy did not silence dissent outright; it reorganised the ecology of interaction so that critique became more individualised and less visible to peers, and more easily displaced by managerial channels.

Despite these constraints, teachers still found ways to repurpose elements of the physical environment. Although no accessible central staffroom remained, staff adapted by gathering informally in empty classrooms during breaks and lunchtimes. These ad hoc arrangements provided some opportunity to socialise and exchange information, yet were largely confined to

pre-existing friendship groups, producing a dispersed pattern of small-scale clustering that several longer-serving teachers contrasted with the earlier communal staffroom.

This shift carried more than logistical weight. For Foucault (1984b:252), '[s]pace is fundamental in any form of communal life' and is never neutral. It functions as a key technique in the organisation of conduct and is 'fundamental in any exercise of power.' The dispersal of staff into isolated classrooms reordered patterns of sociability, curtailing spontaneous encounter and reducing the occasions on which discussion could become collective. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977:143–147) shows how disciplinary institutions operate through the partitioning and ordering of space: 'the organisation of a serial space was one of the great technical mutations of... education.' Space becomes an instrument of governance, supporting surveillance, normalisation and control.

The removal of communal spaces represented a clear structural constraint, a change in the material infrastructure that reconfigured patterns of staff interaction, but it did not extinguish agency altogether. Teachers adjusted, using what remained available. Their responses exemplify what Archer (1996:197) calls 'containment strategies', where constrained actors accommodate the demands of a given 'situational logic' (ibid.:158) by devising workarounds rather than engaging in overt resistance. The use of empty classrooms as micro-spaces of collegial encounter constituted situated acts of collectivity within an environment increasingly geared towards individualisation. The spatio-material and socio-technical setting did not determine action, but it clearly contoured the possibilities for interaction. By reducing the frequency, spontaneity and inclusiveness of staff relations, it gradually eroded the informal culture that had once supported wider solidarity.

This is sharply visible in the post-pandemic reorganisation of physical and communicative space. The loss of staffrooms and the growing reliance on digitally archived communication narrowed the practical conditions for solidarity, weakening collective bonds and normalising self-monitoring. Teachers were not governed through overt demands to conform so much as through a reorganisation of how they might connect. The effect was not simply social isolation: it was a recasting of everyday working life in ways that made collegial critique harder to sustain and amplified managerial channels.

9.7.2 Relational spaces and professional solidarities

By contrast, the retention of shared and accessible staffrooms in Larwood School, together with the lighter integration of digital systems, functioned as a spatio-material buffer against the isolating tendencies of platform governance. These spaces operated as what Frelin and Grannäs (2014:141) call 'relational spaces', sites of intersubjective sense-making where trust, informal critique and operational talk circulated together. This configuration sustained the everyday possibility for teachers to share views and work out negotiated responses to leadership initiatives. The literature

on workplace collegiality and democratic professional culture provides useful context here: research on teacher professional communities consistently shows that informal interaction is central to the reproduction of shared values and occupational identity (Helsby, 1999).

These interactions did not amount to resistance in any dramatic sense. Rather, they reflected what Ball and Olmedo (2013:86) describe as ‘a particular type of struggle against/with the practices of performativity.’ Teachers could decompress, exchange views and, at times, push back in modest ways. As Foucault (1982:211) reminds us, ‘[t]he main objective of these struggles is to attack not so much “such and such” an institution of power... but rather a technique, a form of power.’ Several staff described moments in which they collectively questioned or reshaped leadership decisions, especially around particular data processes. Archer’s (2007) idea of contextual continuity is helpful here: enduring structural and cultural conditions provided the background for reflexive deliberation, making it possible for staff to engage critically with changing governance expectations. Larwood School’s preservation of collegial norms and pre-digital routines thus worked as a form of cultural anchoring, allowing teachers to negotiate managerial demands on their own terms.

Neither school, it should be said, designed its physical environment with teacher agency as an explicit goal. These outcomes were by-products of broader organisational decisions: in Matson Academy, the MAT’s pursuit of efficiency and spatial expansion; in Larwood School, the continuation of established spatial arrangements within LA-maintained governance. Yet the consequences show how strongly the material dimension mediates the effects of platform power. Had Matson Academy retained its staffroom and supported informal horizontal dialogue, teachers might plausibly have raised concerns about workload or the utility of particular data-entry demands earlier, perhaps moderating some of the more punitive features of the new systems. That would have represented a missed opportunity for upward morphogenesis: structural elaboration driven by collective agency (Archer, 2010). Conversely, had Larwood School converted to academy status under a centrally imposed platform regime, one would expect greater compliance and diminished resistance, moving the school closer to morphostasis.

Such counterfactuals underline the explanatory value of a critical realist methodology attentive to how causal mechanisms are realised through material conditions. Repeated physical co-presence in the staffroom reinforced norm circles of collegiality (Elder-Vass, 2010). Norms, as Elder-Vass argues, do not persist as abstract ideals but through the ongoing commitment of their carriers, renewed by recognition and correction in everyday interaction. The density and reach of collegial norm circles in Larwood School were preserved because teachers routinely crossed departmental and hierarchical boundaries, reproducing shared expectations of mutual aid and candid exchange. As Elder-Vass (2010:23, 28) notes, ‘when a person acts, they do so both as an individual and as part of a structure’, while norm circles have emergent powers because ‘the process of interaction between the parts may be called the generative mechanism that produces the emergent property

concerned.’ The staffroom was thus more than a material affordance; it worked as a social mechanism for the reproduction of collective values. In this environment, collegial norms were repeatedly enacted and reinforced, strengthening teachers’ sense of shared efficacy.

The same arrangements can also be read through Lemke’s (2021, *passim*) reworking of the government of things as the orchestration of environments rather than the issuing of direct commands. In contexts where rooms, rhythms and social encounters allow privacy and horizontal interaction, the scope for collective agency widens. In Larwood School, digital systems such as Google Classroom and SIMS supplemented rather than displaced in-person collaboration, enabling staff to appropriate technology on their own terms. This in turn supported what Kale, Singh and Perlmutter (2000:218) term ‘relational capital’: the trust and mutual respect that arise through close, repeated interaction and which organisational scholarship links to resilience under technological change.

Elder-Vass’s account of norm circles, Lemke’s emphasis on environmental composition and the concept of relational capital all point in the same direction: the preservation of staffroom space in Larwood School sustained solidarity by embedding collegial values in both material surroundings and everyday practice.

At the level of the real, the relevant SEPs and CEPs (open staffrooms, norms of collegial exchange and a leadership culture not predisposed towards intensive surveillance) created the conditions for a more collaborative working life. At the level of the actual, these conditions were activated in recurring patterns: cross-departmental interaction, informal problem-solving and collective discussion of governance initiatives. At the empirical level, teachers described trust, solidarity and a felt ability to raise concerns with leadership. In Archer’s (2010) morphogenetic terms, this coupling of SEPs and CEPs maintained a social ecology in which change could be negotiated from below rather than imposed unilaterally from above.

That configuration remained contingent. As Lemke’s (2021) account of governmentality makes clear, shifts in the orchestration of environments, such as the adoption of an integrated MIS like Arbor, a new headteacher or revised inspection criteria, could reconfigure communicative channels and subtly recalibrate the balance between offline collegiality and online visibility. Such changes would risk fragmenting norm circles and constraining the spatial and social conditions that currently sustain collaborative agency. The preservation of relational space is both a mechanism of solidarity and a point of possible vulnerability.

Taken as a whole, the Larwood School case shows that physical and digital infrastructures are co-productive of school culture. Where spatial arrangements allow the reproduction of collegial norm circles, they strengthen the capacity for collective reflexivity and the negotiated appropriation of platform demands. For Elder-Vass (2010:17; *italics in original*), an ‘entity may be defined as a

persistent whole formed from a set of parts that is structured by the relations between these parts.' This materially grounded sociality works against the morphostatic pull of platform-driven individualisation and helps preserve a richer, more autonomous conception of working life in the digital age.

Using Foucault's (1977:26) language of disciplinary power, the shift away from open staff spaces can be read as part of a wider 'microphysics of power', in which school authority operates not only through formal mandates but through the spatial and temporal organisation of everyday life. As Foucault (1982:790) notes, such mechanisms do not repress action outright but work to 'structure the possible field of action of others.' In Matson Academy, teachers remained social actors, but their forms of collegiality were spatially narrowed and rendered less visible, and therefore less collectively powerful.

The contrast between the two schools therefore shows why material and technological context matters for any explanation of platform governance. The cases demonstrate that platforms, once introduced, interact with spatial configurations either to intensify managerial control or to sustain forms of community. As Elder-Vass (2010:17) puts it, '[a]n emergent property is one that is not possessed by any of the parts individually and that would not be possessed by the full set of parts in the absence of a structuring set of relations between them.' In Matson Academy, platform integration coincided with spatial re-engineering in ways that collectively reinforced a morphostatic outcome: a more atomised and compliance-oriented experience that reproduced established hierarchies (Archer, 2010). In Larwood School, by contrast, partial and uneven platform adoption, combined with the retention of shared spaces, produced a more hybrid configuration. Performative pressures were present but coexisted with morphogenetic spaces of collaboration and agency.

These findings contribute to the literature on platformisation by showing how digital infrastructure and physical architecture jointly mediate shifts in institutional culture (Whyte, 2013). They also speak to wider debates on working identity in the digital age. As scholars such as Lawn (2013) and Selwyn, Pangrazio and Cumbo (2022) note, identity is shaped not only in formal meetings and training but through daily encounters with and contestations of digital systems. The study extends this by showing that where teachers are able to negotiate those encounters collectively, as in Larwood School, working life can retain a richer and more autonomous character. In the MAT school, by contrast, some staff expressed concern that their role was increasingly being reduced to a sequence of data-driven tasks, a risk that may arise under similar governance conditions.

The juxtaposition of Matson Academy and Larwood School therefore shows how the absence or retention of communal space has important consequences for solidarity under platform governance. In Matson Academy, the loss of communal areas and the rise of digitally archived communication produced a morphostatic environment in which collegiality was fragmented and

agency narrowed. The preservation of staffrooms and lighter digital integration in Larwood School, by contrast, sustained norm circles of reciprocity, generated relational capital and enabled a more collaborative engagement with managerial demands. Both cases demonstrate that platforms do not operate in isolation: they intersect with spatial and cultural infrastructures to shape organisational trajectories, and those trajectories diverge significantly depending on whether communal conditions for collective agency are preserved or dismantled.

9.8 Summary

Chapter 9 has developed a mechanism-based account of how digital platforms acquire governing force in schools, drawing on the integrated triple-stack framework of Bhaskar, Archer and Elder-Vass to move beyond empirical description towards causal explanation. The sections have been cumulative rather than parallel: norm circle configuration, established in Section 9.2, functions as the generative mechanism through which the phenomena examined in subsequent sections – compliance, constrained or enabled agency, surveillance effects, and spatial solidarities – are produced and sustained.

The contrast between the two schools is consistent across all five analytical themes. Matson Academy presents a case of normative saturation: tightly coupled, leadership-aligned norm circles amplified compliance expectations through peer endorsement and hierarchical reinforcement, narrowing the range of reflexively imaginable alternatives. Digital platforms did not generate this condition independently; they extended and embedded it, transforming performance indicators and data-production routines into markers of professional legitimacy. Under these conditions, disciplinary visibility and continuous data production encouraged anticipatory self-regulation, reinforcing processes of subjectivation in which legitimacy became closely tied to maintaining favourable indicators (Foucault, 2019). The removal of communal staff spaces compounded these effects, fragmenting the norm circles through which collective resistance could have previously been sustained; redirecting professional interaction towards monitored digital channels.

Larwood School, by contrast, illustrates normative dispersal. Leadership instability and the persistence of accessible communal staffrooms, within a looser structural alignment, preserved competing norm circles, limiting the consolidation of any single compliance-oriented regime. Platform systems were present but less firmly embedded in enforcement; teachers retained greater latitude for selective engagement, and resistance could acquire collective rather than merely individual form. The staffroom functioned not as incidental amenity but as a spatio-material mechanism for reproducing collegial norms of reciprocity and mutual critique, sustaining the relational conditions under which teacher agency could be negotiated from below.

These findings demonstrate that the governance effects of digital platforms are neither uniform nor technologically predetermined. They are emergent outcomes, shaped by structural conditions, cultural inheritances, norm circle configurations and reflexive teacher responses. The tightly aligned NC configuration in Matson Academy stabilised a self-reinforcing regime of performative surveillance, producing morphostasis at T4. The relative misalignment of structures and norms in Larwood School created openings for negotiation and contestation, allowing limited morphogenetic movement, though always in fragile and contingent ways. In both cases, the material conditions of space were constitutive of those configurations rather than merely their backdrop.

9.9 Contributions

This chapter has developed the theoretical discussion of the empirical findings presented in Chapters 6–8, placing them in relation to the conceptual framework developed in Chapters 2–4 and the methodological approach outlined in Chapter 5. The summary that follows is organised around the thesis's three main contributions.

9.9.1 Contribution 1 – Bhaskar, Archer and Elder-Vass: integrated framework

The first contribution lies in the conceptualisation of digital platforms as instruments of normative power through an integrated 'triple-stack' comprising Bhaskar's (2008a[1975]; 2005[1979]) stratified ontology, Archer's Morphogenetic Approach (1995) and Elder-Vass's norm circles (2010, 2012). Each component operates at a distinct analytical level, and only in combination do they provide a sufficiently differentiated account of platform governance. Bhaskar's stratified ontology provides the foundational claim that social reality is structured across the domains of the real, the actual and the empirical, enabling the analysis to move beyond observable events to the underlying causal mechanisms that generate them. Archer's Morphogenetic Approach supplies the temporal dimension, tracing how structural and cultural emergent properties (SEPs and CEPs) condition action across successive cycles of conditioning, interaction and elaboration. Yet neither Bhaskar nor Archer specifies how normative force is reproduced and contested at the group level in everyday practice. Elder-Vass's norm circles fill that lacuna, identifying the meso-level social processes through which structural and cultural pressures acquire their specific normative character in situated organisational settings. Whilst scholarly exchanges between Archer and Elder-Vass exist (notably Archer and Elder-Vass, 2012) and individual elements of this framework have been drawn on in adjacent CR scholarship, no prior work has combined all three as a unified analytical instrument applied to the governance of schools as organisations. It is this synthesis, enabling movement across ontological depth, temporal mechanism and group-level normative process, that constitutes the first contribution.

This thesis has argued that platforms do not exercise governance effects through their technical properties alone. Their power is mediated through historically sedimented governance structures, culturally sustained expectations and teachers' reflexive deliberations. This places the thesis in productive tension with deterministic accounts in educational technology policy discourse and strands of critical platform studies that construe platformisation as inherently or uniformly controlling (Selwyn, 2022; van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018). The integrated triple-stack is necessary to explain why similar digital tools generated markedly different governance dynamics across the two schools: in Matson Academy, platforms consolidated managerial authority and narrowed teachers' working lives; in Larwood School, structural and cultural conditions produced a more fragmented and contested digital environment. At the level of governance, the triple-stack demonstrates that what counts as platform governance and what effects it produces cannot be determined in advance from governance model alone. It is an emergent outcome, and the integrated framework is necessary to explain how that emergence occurs.

9.9.2 Contribution 2 – Norm circles: meso-level analysis of normative power

The second contribution is the application of Elder-Vass's norm circles as a meso-level mechanism in the analysis to examine how digital governance is established in schools. The thesis has shown that norm circles, mapped visually through the NC diagrams in Figures 9.2 and 9.3, specify the group-level social processes through which SEPs and CEPs acquire normative force in everyday practice; a dimension that Archer's morphogenetic model implies but does not fully elaborate. In Matson Academy, dominant compliance norm circles echoed managerial priorities and amplified performative understandings of teaching, sustaining a condition of normative saturation. In Larwood School, multiple and sometimes competing circles allowed alternative values to persist, supporting a more autonomous subject position and creating greater room for reflexive resistance and selective engagement with platform demands. The NC maps operationalise this concept as a comparative diagnostic device, one that could transfer to other educational and organisational settings where digital governance produces divergent outcomes despite similar structural pressures. Archer's morphogenetic framework added a temporal dimension, tracing how conditions at T_1 shaped interaction at T_2 – T_3 and contributed to either morphostasis or morphogenesis at T_4 . In Matson Academy, the close alignment of SEPs and CEPs reinforced existing compliance norms, consolidating a morphostatic trajectory. Weaker alignment and more plural norm circles allowed limited morphogenetic movement in Larwood School, though those openings remained vulnerable to subsequent structural change. For the governance literature, the implication is that institutional arrangements, whether MAT or LA, are not determinative of digital governance outcomes; what matters is the normative architecture through which governance mandates are translated into everyday expectation, and norm circles are the mechanism through which that translation occurs.

A brief terminological note on the relationship between these two frameworks is warranted here. In Archer's account, CEPs are relatively enduring cultural properties, prevailing ideas, values and expectations, that pre-exist particular interactions and constitute part of the T_1 conditioning context. Norm circles, in Elder-Vass's formulation, specify how those cultural inheritances are reproduced and contested: they are the groups through which specific norms are endorsed and sanctioned in everyday interaction. Throughout this chapter, CEPs refer to the inherited cultural conditions at T_1 ; norm circles identify the social groupings through which those conditions acquire normative force at T_2 – T_3 and either stabilise or are reworked at T_4 .

9.9.3 Contribution 3 – Schools as digital organisations and the work of teachers

The third contribution concerns the implications of the analysis for schools within Organisation Studies and HRM. The integrated theoretical framework developed in this thesis has not previously been applied to the governance of English secondary schools, and the findings demonstrate what this combination makes visible that prior accounts could not. The chapter has shown that physical space and digital infrastructure must be considered together in any account of school governance under platformisation. The removal of communal staff spaces and the redirection of communication into monitored digital channels in Matson Academy fragmented pre-existing norm circles and reinforced vertical oversight, producing a school that is, in narrow operational terms, digitally coherent, but at the cost of teacher autonomy and the informal collegial life that sustains professional discretion. Larwood School presents a different kind of outcome: platform adoption that is less uniform and less intensively monitored, sustained by accessible shared spaces and a more plural normative environment, and one that preserves greater professional agency even within a broader culture of measurement. That the more digitally accomplished school is also the more corporatised, and that the less digitally compliant school is the more community-oriented, is not incidental. It reflects the emergent character of digital governance: what counts as success depends entirely on whose priorities the governance regime serves. These distinctions only become analytically tractable once SEPs and CEPs are disaggregated through norm circles and situated within a stratified ontological account; precisely the work that the triple-stack framework performs.

In doing so, the analysis extends a tradition within the sociology of work concerned with how managerial control is exercised through organisational systems rather than through direct supervision alone. This tradition runs from Braverman's (1974) account of deskilling and the separation of conception from execution, through Foucauldian accounts of disciplinary visibility and normalising power, to more recent work on the digital reorganisation of professional labour (Zuboff, 2019; Hayes et al., 2018). What this thesis contributes to that tradition is a mechanism-based, organisationally grounded account of how these dynamics operate specifically in schools, through the interaction of spatial, normative and technological conditions.

9.9.4 Emergent governance and closing reflections

These three contributions challenge deterministic accounts of platform control and show that governance is an emergent outcome of interacting structural, cultural, agential, socio-technical and spatio-material mechanisms. For HRM research and practice, this raises important questions about how schools manage the unintended governance consequences of platform adoption: the erosion of informal communication and the narrowing of teacher discretion that follow when spatial and digital changes are introduced without attention to their cumulative effects on working life.

A further positioning point is worth making explicit. The literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3 operates predominantly at the sector level, documenting macro-level policy trajectories, commercial EdTech expansion and the structural conditions of platformisation across English schooling. The contribution of this thesis is to bring that analysis inside organisations: the NC configurations and reflexive responses examined here show how those sector-wide pressures are differentially translated into governance outcomes within schools, shaped by spatial arrangements that prior accounts have not specified. The intra-organisational perspective developed here is therefore not a narrowing of the literature's concerns but a necessary complement to them.

The concluding chapter that follows draws together the empirical and theoretical strands of the thesis, reaffirms the central arguments, reflects on the study's limitations and considers implications for policy, practice and future research.

10 Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

This thesis has examined how digital platforms reshape governance in English secondary schools and, in doing so, reconfigure the conditions of teachers' everyday work. Drawing on a comparative case study of a Multi-Academy Trust school (Matson Academy) and a Local Authority-maintained school (Larwood School), it has shown that platform adoption carries consequences well beyond the technical: it alters how teaching is made visible, how it is evaluated and what forms of intervention become possible. Comparable digital systems, when embedded within different organisational and cultural settings, produced markedly different patterns of oversight and experience.

Chapters 6 to 8 established the empirical and explanatory basis for this claim. They traced how platform use unfolded in each school and showed how its effects were shaped by pre-existing structural conditions and normative expectations. Moving from thematic coding to stratified and morphogenetic analysis, the study identified the mechanisms through which digital oversight consolidated in one context while remaining uneven and contested in the other. Chapter 9 then clarified the form of power involved. Platform governance was theorised as an emergent configuration of normative power, rather than as a direct outcome of technology or surveillance alone. Expectations of conduct were stabilised and reproduced through overlapping norm circles, with digital infrastructures extending their reach and embedding them more firmly in everyday practice.

This concluding chapter develops that argument. It returns to the research questions, reflects on the study's theoretical contributions and limitations, and considers positionality alongside implications for policy and further research. In doing so, it situates the study within wider debates on digital governance and organisational control, while retaining a focus on the emergent and contingent character of platform governance and the agency of those working within it.

10.2 Revisiting the research questions

RQ1: *How do digital platforms restructure managerial oversight and teacher autonomy within English state-maintained secondary schools?*

The study shows that digital platforms reshape managerial oversight and teacher autonomy not simply by extending surveillance, but by stabilising and intensifying normative expectations of

practice. Through the routine production of visible and standardised data, platforms embed particular criteria of evaluation into everyday work. Oversight is extended through digital infrastructure, but its force depends on how expectations are collectively sustained within each school.

Platform use in Matson Academy aligned closely with senior leadership priorities. Daily learning walks and established data routines normalised continuous visibility, narrowing the scope for discretionary judgment. Compliance became absorbed into shared understandings of legitimate practice, and oversight operated through a tightly aligned set of norm circles in which expectations were consistently reinforced.

Similar systems were present in Larwood School, but less firmly embedded in enforcement. Leadership instability and weaker alignment amongst senior staff meant that expectations were unevenly reproduced. Teachers retained greater latitude in day-to-day work, while communal spaces sustained alternative forms of interpretation and peer support. Digital oversight remained present, but its reach was less consolidated and more open to reinterpretation.

Across both cases, platforms functioned as mediating infrastructures through which oversight was enacted and autonomy conditioned. At Matson Academy the platforms did not so much introduce new mechanisms of control as consolidate and intensify pre-existing accountability structures, extending and embedding what was already present. At Larwood School, by contrast, platforms neither consolidated nor reorganised governance in any settled sense, remaining loosely coupled with managerial intent. Their significance lies not in the technology itself, but in their capacity to stabilise and extend normative regulation within particular organisational settings. These dynamics reconfigured teacher–manager relations not through formal restructuring but through the gradual redefinition of what counts as visible and professionally legitimate conduct within each school.

RQ2: *What underlying mechanisms and organisational conditions help to explain variation in platform governance and staff experience across different school governance contexts (Multi-Academy Trust and Local Authority)?*

The comparative analysis indicates that variation in platform governance is best explained through differences in structural conditions and normative configuration rather than governance model alone. Governance arrangements and leadership coherence shaped the conditions under which digital infrastructures acquired force.

In the MAT academy, centralised authority and a relatively stable accountability culture enabled the consolidation of aligned norm circles. Expectations surrounding data use and visibility were reinforced across hierarchical levels, while digital systems extended their reach by preserving

records and enabling retrospective scrutiny. Over time, these arrangements reproduced themselves, stabilising a morphostatic pattern.

Leadership turnover in the Local Authority school and a less settled accountability environment limited the coherence of normative alignment. Norm circles were more dispersed and less tightly integrated across organisational levels. Intensified oversight therefore did not consolidate in the same way. Digital infrastructures were present, but their effects remained uneven, reflecting ongoing tension rather than settled reproduction.

These findings indicate that platform governance is emergent rather than structurally determined. Governance arrangements do not, in themselves, decide outcomes. Platform governance takes shape through the interaction of organisational conditions, digital systems and reflexive teacher response, filtered through normative endorsement. Digital infrastructures carry causal powers, but whether and how these are activated depends on the conditions in which they are embedded. Norm circles are the mechanism through which those conditions are translated into lived experience.

RQ3: *In what ways do teachers interpret, negotiate and resist platform-based control, and how do these practices shape the conduct and governance of school life?*

Teachers were not passive recipients of platform governance. They acted within overlapping normative environments, shaping how expectations were interpreted and enacted.

Where normative alignment was strong, as in Matson Academy, resistance tended to take subtle forms. Selective compliance and informal communication introduced friction into platform routines without directly challenging them. Governance was therefore sustained through ongoing interaction rather than imposed in a purely mechanical way.

Resistance was more visible in Larwood School, and at times collective. Teachers questioned the value of particular systems and sustained alternative understandings of competence through peer discussion. Communal spaces provided opportunities for reflexive deliberation, moderating the reach of digital oversight.

Across both cases, agency remained central to governance outcomes, although its capacity to reshape governance operated asymmetrically. At Larwood School, collective practices, including the adoption of alternative platforms and organised forms of resistance, produced tangible policy reversals, illustrating how teacher agency can exert upward causal influence on governance arrangements. At Matson Academy, agency was predominantly individualised and covert; it introduced friction into routines without materially altering the governance configuration. Teachers' judgments nonetheless shaped whether platform-centred expectations were reinforced or unsettled in either setting. Platform governance therefore emerged as a contingent and

negotiated process, enacted through structure, culture and reflexive agency rather than imposed in any settled form.

10.3 Limitations of the study

The study's two-case qualitative design is both a deliberate methodological choice and a source of constraints that bear on how the findings should be read. Restricting the analysis to Matson Academy and Larwood School, two secondary schools within a specific regional context, means that the patterns identified cannot be generalised statistically across English secondary education. The study offers, instead, analytic generalisation: by identifying the mechanisms through which norm circles mediate platform governance, and the organisational conditions under which those mechanisms activate differently, the analysis may offer insight into settings that share relevant structural or cultural features. The comparison between a consolidated MAT academy and a Local Authority-maintained school with recent leadership instability provides a productive contrast, but it is not a representative sample and the findings should be read accordingly.

The empirical material rests primarily on semi-structured interview accounts, supplemented by documentary analysis and observation conducted during the fieldwork period. This means the analysis is constructed through participants' descriptions of how platform governance operated in everyday practice, rather than through sustained direct observation of it. At Matson Academy, teachers' accounts of Go4Schools, learning walks and dashboard-based oversight described processes that could be cross-referenced with policy and procedural documentation; at Larwood School, accounts of platform fragmentation and the persistent use of Google Classroom by individual teachers despite wider managerial instability were triangulated in a similar way. Prior employment at Matson Academy sharpened my interpretive sensitivity to institutional dynamics and supported the candour of participant accounts, but it does not constitute formal data and the explanatory claims advanced here rest on the systematically collected empirical record. Continuous ethnographic fieldwork, or a more extended observational phase, might have generated a different kind of access to platform routines and the more tacit dimensions of normative compliance and avoidance that interview-based inquiry may not fully surface.

The theoretical framework also establishes limits. Norm circles provide a productive meso-level mechanism for tracing how endorsement and sanction operate within and across organisational levels, but they do not account for the full range of causal conditions shaping the schools studied. The specific platforms encountered in these schools, including SIMS, Go4Schools, Teams and Satchel One, are not merely organisational tools; they are commercial products developed by private providers and embedded in a wider political economy of educational technology. The role of provider strategies, licensing conditions and budget constraints in shaping which systems were adopted, sustained or abandoned falls largely outside the frame of analysis here. These are not

peripheral considerations. The transition from SIMS to Arbor, which was under discussion at Larwood School, illustrates how platform change can be driven by procurement decisions well beyond school-level governance. The account developed here is deliberately focused on organisational mediation, not on that wider political economy.

The study was conducted during a specific window of post-pandemic consolidation, in which both schools were still adjusting to the rapid embedding of systems that had been intensified by necessity between 2020 and 2022. The patterns identified, including the morphostatic consolidation of platform power at Matson Academy and the contested, fragmented character of digital oversight at Larwood School, should be understood as configurations within that particular phase of platformisation. Governance arrangements at both schools were not static; they remained susceptible to leadership change, policy reform and commercial platform development. The findings describe tendencies rather than settled states.

Finally, my position as a former teacher at Matson Academy introduces interpretive risks that cannot be eliminated entirely, even through rigorous reflexive practice. The nature and management of this positionality are addressed in Section 10.4 below.

10.4 Researcher reflexivity and positionality

My dual positionality across the two case schools shaped the inquiry in distinct ways at each site, and the relationship between those two forms of positioning was itself analytically significant.

At Matson Academy, I had worked as a teacher prior to conducting the research. I had experience of the institutional culture before the major changes documented in this thesis, including the shift away from communal staff space and the deepening of platform-based oversight under the current leadership regime. This prior familiarity meant that participants frequently drew on shared institutional reference points, speaking openly about changes to the staffroom, the introduction of new monitoring systems and the shifting expectations surrounding data use. The candour and specificity of these accounts owed something to that shared history. It also created interpretive risks. Familiarity with an institution can naturalise what should remain analytically visible; it can also lead a researcher to read ambiguous evidence through the lens of prior experience rather than through systematic engagement with the data. I addressed this through sustained reflexive note-keeping, by recording my interpretive assumptions during the analytic process and testing them against interview material and documents, and through regular supervisory dialogue aimed at surfacing interpretations I might otherwise have allowed to pass unchallenged. Explanatory claims about Matson Academy were grounded in what participants said rather than in what I recalled.

At Larwood School, the methodological challenges were different. Without prior institutional knowledge, I was dependent on trust-building and on reading an unfamiliar setting through the evidence it generated rather than through familiarity. Time spent on site prior to the formal data collection period helped establish a research relationship that was not experienced as inspection, a concern that was heightened by the school's history of leadership instability and its exposure to scrutiny during a difficult period. The distance from Larwood School proved analytically productive in one specific respect: it sharpened attention to features of normative alignment and platform use that might otherwise have appeared unremarkable. The dispersed and inconsistent character of platform governance at Larwood School, and the persistence of informal peer cultures in communal spaces that continued to function as alternative normative environments, became more analytically visible because they diverged from the consolidated pattern I had documented at Matson Academy.

The contrast between the two sites was therefore not simply a methodological feature of the comparative design. It was a condition that shaped my interpretive development across the period of fieldwork. My experience at Matson Academy did not function as a default template against which Larwood School was measured; rather, the comparative structure of the analysis required that each case be understood on its own terms before the cross-case mechanisms were traced. The identification of norm circles as mediating mechanisms emerged partly from the work of explaining why two schools with access to broadly similar platforms produced such different patterns of oversight and teacher experience.

Positionality in this study is treated as an analytical condition rather than a methodological liability. In line with critical realist commitments, the researcher is not positioned outside the social world under investigation. What matters is how that position is managed. Systematic use of reflexive procedures and grounded interpretation enabled a form of critical distance that did not require pretending the position was neutral. The credibility of the mechanism-based explanation advanced here rests on that transparency.

10.5 Implications for policy and practice

The findings have practical implications that extend beyond the two schools studied, at a moment when the embedding of digital platforms in English secondary education shows no sign of slowing. Three areas warrant particular attention.

For policymakers, the central implication is that policy focused on digital infrastructure cannot be treated as separable from questions of organisational culture and normative alignment. The evidence from Matson Academy shows that platforms such as Go4Schools and Teams, in a setting characterised by leadership coherence and aligned norm circles, can consolidate into instruments

of intensive and self-reproducing oversight, narrowing teachers' interpretive latitude and weakening trust. This is not primarily a consequence of the technology itself; it is an emergent outcome of how expectations are reinforced across organisational levels. Data-driven accountability frameworks do not simply produce more information; they alter the criteria through which professional practice is judged, and they do so in ways that can privilege measurable compliance over relational and contextual judgment. Policy that expands digital monitoring without attending to the normative environments into which systems are introduced risks deepening the performative pressures that teachers in this study described as professionally corrosive. Meaningful consultation with teachers and explicit limits on the evaluative use of platform data are not optional refinements; they are conditions under which digital governance can remain compatible with professional trust.

For Multi-Academy Trust governance structures and school leaders, the findings highlight the specific risks of normative consolidation. The Matson Academy case illustrates what happens when aligned expectations, stable leadership and digital infrastructures reinforce one another over time: oversight becomes self-reproducing, the space for professional discretion contracts and resistance is driven into selective compliance and informal workaround. This is not inevitably a product of MAT governance; it is a product of a particular configuration of normative and structural conditions. Leaders who introduce digital systems without periodic critical review of how they are being used, and without preserving spaces, both physical and organisational, for collegial deliberation, create conditions that are difficult to reverse once consolidated. The loss of communal staff space at Matson Academy was not simply a logistical decision; it was a spatio-material change that weakened the informal normative environments capable of moderating managerial pressure. School leaders should take seriously the claim that the organisation of physical space is consequential for governance – a claim long established in organisation studies, which treats space as socially produced and organisationally consequential rather than as neutral backdrop (Taylor and Spicer, 2007; Dale and Burrell, 2007). The academisation programme created the structural preconditions for precisely this kind of configuration: by concentrating governance authority in MAT executives and attenuating LA oversight and democratic accountability, it produced an institutional setting in which normative consolidation, once established, is difficult to contest from within (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Ball, 2018). The risks identified here are therefore not incidental to MAT governance but are, in part, a structural consequence of it.

For teachers and professional associations, the Larwood School case offers a partial counterpoint. Despite significant leadership instability and the attendant uncertainty, teachers at Larwood maintained stronger informal collegiate cultures and retained greater interpretive latitude in their engagement with digital systems, partly through the sustained use of shared spaces and the persistence of peer-based normative environments. The findings suggest that collective sense-making and sustained professional discussion are not merely supportive of wellbeing; they are

mechanisms through which the consolidating effects of digital oversight can be actively moderated. Structured engagement with data practices, and professional development that treats digital literacy as a critical as well as a technical competence, may help teachers maintain a form of informed agency within increasingly platformised environments.

The broader implication is not that digital platforms should be abandoned or minimised. Their governance effects are contingent and depend on the organisational conditions into which they are introduced; attending to those conditions, rather than treating platforms as neutral administrative tools, is a necessary starting point for practice that is both effective and professionally defensible.

10.6 Future research

Several lines of inquiry follow from the analysis developed here, each connected to specific limitations or unresolved questions in the study.

Longitudinal work would substantially strengthen the explanatory account. The patterns identified at Matson Academy and Larwood School were analysed at a particular moment of post-pandemic consolidation, and both schools were navigating a shared infrastructural transition: each had plans to migrate to Arbor as an all-encompassing cloud MIS, replacing the legacy systems on which their respective governance routines had settled. At Larwood School that transition had already been deferred once, adding a further layer of organisational uncertainty to a setting already marked by leadership instability. A longitudinal design tracking how normative alignments evolve across a transition of that kind, where a new platform carries different embedded logics and requires the renegotiation of established data routines, would test whether norm circle configurations are as durable as the morphostatic pattern at Matson Academy suggests, or whether platform change opens new windows for agential renegotiation. Such studies would also allow closer attention to how leadership turnover reshapes normative environments, as the Larwood School case suggested but could not fully resolve within the design used here.

Closer empirical attention to norm circle dynamics would also be productive. The analysis in this thesis identified norm circles through their effects, via the patterns of endorsement, sanction and normalisation documented across interview accounts and observational data. Future research could map these circles more directly, tracing how they form around specific platform initiatives, how their density and coherence vary across departments, and under what conditions they fragment or reconfigure. More granular analysis of this kind would allow the conditions for morphostasis and morphogenesis to be identified with greater precision and would test whether the mechanism identified here operates consistently across different governance arrangements and subject cultures.

The relationship between reflexive orientations and normative environments also warrants development. Archer's typology of reflexive modes, communicative, autonomous, meta and fractured, provided an important resource in this study, but its application remained largely implicit in the analysis of how teachers responded to platform governance. Future work that explicitly maps different reflexive orientations onto patterns of selective compliance and resistance would allow a more differentiated account of teacher agency in platformised settings. This would be particularly valuable in contexts where normative pressure is strong, since the Matson Academy findings suggested that different teachers navigated platform oversight in ways that appeared to reflect underlying differences in how they deliberated about their individual concerns and priorities.

Comparative work extending the framework to other educational phases and governance contexts would also be productive. The secondary MAT/LA contrast developed here has specific features, including Ofsted inspection criteria and subject-specialist identities, that do not map directly onto further education, primary schooling or higher education settings. Investigating whether norm circles operate as mediating mechanisms in settings with different accountability structures and platform architectures would help establish the transferability of the account and identify where its limits lie.

Finally, platform design merits closer analytical attention. The analysis in this thesis treated platforms primarily as mediating infrastructures whose effects depend on organisational conditions. But platforms such as Satchel One are not organisationally neutral; their architectures embed particular assumptions about what teacher activity should be made visible and how it should be interpreted. Examining how these design choices operationalise evaluative categories and constrain the range of possible normative responses would connect the organisational mechanisms identified here to a level of technical analysis that the current study largely bracketed. Such work would strengthen understanding of how digital infrastructures and normative environments interact to produce the governance outcomes documented across both case schools.

10.7 Concluding thought

What this thesis has ultimately shown is that platform governance in English secondary schools is neither uniform nor inevitable. The two schools at its centre deployed comparable digital systems: behaviour trackers, management information platforms, communication tools, assessment dashboards. What they produced, in terms of oversight and teacher experience, was markedly different. That difference was not a function of the technology. It was a function of the organisations.

At Matson Academy, a tightly aligned set of normative expectations, reinforced consistently from senior leadership through middle management and embedded in the routines of data review and

performance scrutiny, enabled digital platforms to consolidate into a self-reproducing governance regime. The removal of shared staff space and the marginalisation of informal staff networks deprived teachers of the organisational resources through which alternative interpretations might have been sustained. Platform power, here, became morphostatic: difficult to question, difficult to resist, and increasingly naturalised.

At Larwood School, instability did not simply produce dysfunction. The absence of settled normative alignment left room for teachers to maintain interpretive latitude; communal spaces continued to function as sites of peer deliberation; and digital oversight, though present, remained sufficiently contested and fragmented to prevent the same consolidation. Platform governance here was a site of ongoing negotiation rather than a stabilised regime.

These contrasts carry a specific theoretical implication. The argument of this thesis is not that governance arrangements determine platform outcomes, nor that teachers are passively shaped by digital infrastructures. The argument is that platform governance is an emergent configuration of normative power, activated and sustained through structural conditions, digital architectures and reflexive agency, mediated through normative alignment. The mechanisms identified here, principally the formation and durability of norm circles at different organisational levels, are the analytical means by which that interaction can be traced and explained.

The broader stakes of this argument extend beyond the schools studied. As English secondary education becomes more deeply platformised, as Arbor displaces legacy MIS systems and as the data architectures of MAT governance become more sophisticated, the conditions under which digital oversight consolidates or remains open to reinterpretation are likely to intensify. Debates about teacher professionalism, managerial control and the future of school governance cannot be conducted as if digital infrastructure were simply a background condition. It is constitutive of the normative environments in which teachers work, and understanding how it acquires that force, and under what conditions it can be directed differently, is far from settled.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Structure of the school day at Matson Academy

Timing	Activity
08:25–08:30	Whole-staff briefings (key messages from SLT and curriculum leaders).
08:30–08:45	Registration and tutor time.
08:45–09:45	Period 1.
09:45–10:50	Period 2.
10:50–11:10	Morning break.
11:10–12:15	Period 3.
12:15–13:00	Lunch break.
13:00–14:05	Period 4.
14:05–15:10	Period 5.
15:10–16:15	After-school revision sessions, clubs, and activities (optional).

Appendix B: Summary overview of the case-study schools' digital structures

This appendix presents a consolidated summary of the core digital platforms and systems operating within each case-study school at the point of data collection.

Platform	Matson Academy	Larwood School	Usage
CPOMS		✓	Safeguarding and pastoral support recording system.
Evolve	✓	✓	System for managing school trips and off-site activities.
Gmail		✓	Google's email platform for school communication.
Go4Schools	✓	✓	Data tracking system for attendance, assessments, behaviour.
Google Calendar		✓	Tool for scheduling meetings and events.
Google Chrome OS		✓	Operating system on Chromebooks and Google devices.
Google Classroom		✓	Online classroom platform for sharing resources and assignments.
Google Drive		✓	Cloud storage and collaboration platform by Google.
Microsoft Windows OS	✓		Suite of Microsoft tools used for communication and productivity.
MyConcern	✓		Platform for recording and managing safeguarding and wellbeing concerns.
Satchel ONE	✓		Comprehensive, cloud-based learning platform and MIS.
SchoolCloud	✓	✓	Online system for scheduling/hosting parent-teacher meetings.
SharePoint	✓		Microsoft document sharing and collaboration tool.
SIMS	✓	✓	Legacy Management Information System for student data and timetabling.
Staff Hub		✓	Internal staff communications and resource-sharing hub.
Unifrog	✓	✓	Platform for careers guidance and post-school transitions.
UpLearn	✓		Online learning platform for A-level science, maths, psychology and economics.

Appendix C: Interview schedules

This appendix provides the semi-structured interview schedules used in the two case studies. The questions below guided rather than scripted each interview; wording and order were varied responsively and participants were free to introduce issues of their own.

Appendix C1: Matson Academy (Multi-Academy Trust) schedule

Senior Leadership Team (Principal / SLT)

Time	Topic areas and questions
5 mins	Topic area 1 – Introductions Re-emphasise confidentiality, anonymity and freedom to withdraw. Could you please start by providing your name, job title and a brief description of the nature of your role within the school and the wider academy?
5–10 mins	Topic area 2 – Platform usage How does the school/academy use EdTech platforms? In what ways are the use of EdTech platforms beneficial and/or challenging in your daily role and for the wider school community?
10–20 mins	Topic area 3 – Selection and implementation The pandemic saw a rapid acceleration of the use of EdTech in schooling. How do you feel this period has shaped the legacy of technologies we see in your school today? Have you, for example, made the conscious decision to maintain certain digital practices due to their perceived functional value? If so, could you talk about the specific advantages of taking such an approach. Can you describe the process(es) that you go through with regards to the adoption of digital platforms? As a Multi-Academy Trust, how, if at all, does this legal designation afford greater freedoms with regards to your purchase and implementation of these technologies? Could you explain the specific motivations that have led to you adopting these technologies? To what extent have these decisions been influenced by internal and/or external factors? (Prompt: for example, the pursuit of greater school efficiencies, student/staff development, the fulfilment of Ofsted inspection criteria or government policy.) (Supplementary question) It would be useful if you could try to rank these factors in order of their significance in your decision-making?
5–10 mins	Topic area 4 – Teacher–manager relations As their roles have evolved with the expansion of digital platforms in your school, how do you encourage positive collaboration and professional development of staff around EdTech use?
5–10 mins	Topic area 5 – Data use and transparency As a school, how do you use the data generated from your digital platforms? For example, at the level of school, department or individual teacher? How has this changed? (Prompt: safeguarding the security, storage and sharing of data.)
5–10 mins	Close of interview

Time	Topic areas and questions
	Open question: Is there anything else that you would like to say about your role, the use of digital platforms in your school or the wider educational landscape? Express gratitude and thank the participant for their time and contributions. Any questions for me? Explain how their answers will help the research. Discuss future plans and the potential for further contact (if necessary).

Classroom teachers

Time	Topic areas and questions
5 mins	Topic area 1 – Introductions Re-emphasise confidentiality, anonymity and freedom to withdraw. Could you please start by providing your name, job title and a brief description of your role in the school and department?
5–10 mins	Topic area 2 – Platform usage How do you use digital platforms in your role as a teacher? (Prompt: types of platforms, usage patterns.) How has this changed, if at all, since the pandemic? In what ways do you feel the use of EdTech is beneficial and/or challenging in your daily role? Do you / how do you integrate EdTech platforms into your wider pedagogical approach and curriculum planning?
10–20 mins	Topic area 3 – Impact on agency How, if at all, has the use of EdTech platforms affected your professional autonomy and decision-making? Do you feel the school's adoption of EdTech platforms has empowered or constrained you as a teacher? Has / how has the use of EdTech platforms impacted your daily workload and interactions with the wider school community? For example, department heads, senior management, students, parents/carers and support staff. Do you have any concerns about EdTech platforms increasing the surveillance of your work or increased managerial control?
10–20 mins	Topic area 4 – Data and performance How are you personally evaluated or held accountable for, or by, the data generated from EdTech platforms? (Prompt: student progress, lesson observations, appraisals, setting/checking homework, marking/feedback, reporting and the internal monitoring of standards by managers.) Have you observed any changes to these processes over time? Have you had / do you have any say in the EdTech used at your school or in your subject area? Have you ever felt under pressure to adopt specific EdTech tools due to school policies? (Prompt: for example, during feedback reviews or the fulfilment of Ofsted inspection criteria.) If so, to what extent have you found these useful?
5–10 mins	Close of interview Open question: Is there anything else that you would like to say about your role, use of digital platforms in your school or the wider educational landscape? Express gratitude and thanks for the participant's time and contributions. Any questions for me? Explain how their

Time	Topic areas and questions
	answers will help the research. Discuss future plans and the potential for further contact (if necessary).

Middle leaders / Heads of Department

Time	Topic areas and questions
5 mins	Topic area 1 – Introductions Re-emphasise confidentiality, anonymity and freedom to withdraw. Could you please start by providing your name, job title and a brief description of your role in the school and department?
5–10 mins	Topic area 2 – Platform usage How do you use digital platforms in your role as HoD? (Prompt: types of platforms, usage patterns.) How has this changed, if at all, since the pandemic? In what ways do you feel the use of EdTech is beneficial and/or challenging in your daily role? Do you / how do you integrate EdTech platforms into your wider pedagogical approach and curriculum planning?
10–15 mins	Topic area 3 – Teacher–manager relations Have you encountered any challenges or drawbacks associated with EdTech use in your department? How are the student performance and tracking data generated by EdTech platforms used in your school/department? How, if at all, has EdTech impacted on the relationship between you and your staff? Does it, for example, form a basis of department meeting agendas, student monitoring or targeted interventions?
10–15 mins	Topic area 4 – Data and performance How are EdTech data used to inform the pursuit of the wider school objectives? For example, performance measures, teacher appraisals, reporting, lesson observations, feedback reviews, learning walks, benchmarking of specific subject areas or the internal monitoring of standards. How do you feel about this? Have you observed any changes in how you are personally evaluated or held accountable for, or by, the data generated by EdTech platforms? For example, with regards to student progress, lesson observations, appraisals or the internal monitoring of standards by SLT. Do you have any concerns about EdTech platforms increasing the surveillance of your work or increased managerial control?
10–15 mins	Topic area 5 – Selection and implementation Can you describe the process for selecting and implementing EdTech platforms in your department? What factors do you consider when making these decisions? Have you ever felt under pressure to adopt specific EdTech tools due to internal or external pressures? For example, during feedback reviews or for the fulfilment of Ofsted inspection criteria. If so, how have you found this? Can you describe what responsibilities, if any, you have for ensuring that teachers receive adequate professional development, training and support for the effective use of EdTech tools? If so, how do you go about this?
5–10 mins	Close of interview Open question: Is there anything else that you would like to say about your role, the use of digital platforms in your school or the wider educational landscape? Express gratitude and

Time	Topic areas and questions
	thank the participant for their time and contributions. Any questions for me? Explain how their answers will help the research. Discuss future plans and the potential for further contact (if necessary).

Technical systems manager

Time	Topic areas and questions
5 mins	Topic area 1 – Introductions Re-emphasise confidentiality, anonymity and freedom to withdraw. Would you please start by providing your name, job title and a brief description of the nature of your role within the school and academy?
10–20 mins	Topic area 2 – Selection and implementation The pandemic saw a rapid acceleration of the use of EdTech in schooling. How did this period shape the legacy of technologies we see in your school today? Can you describe the process(es) that you go through with regards to the adoption of digital platforms? As a Multi-Academy Trust, how, if at all, does this legal designation afford greater freedoms with regards to your purchase and implementation of these technologies? Could you explain the specific motivations that have led to you adopting these technologies? To what extent have these decisions been influenced by internal and/or external factors? (Prompt: for example, the pursuit of greater school efficiencies, student/staff development, the fulfilment of Ofsted inspection criteria or government policy.) (Supplementary question) It would be useful if you could try to rank these factors in order of their significance in your decision-making? Does / how does the ICT department evaluate the effectiveness of different EdTech platforms?
10–15 mins	Topic area 3 – Technical aspects and integration Can you describe the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating various EdTech platforms with the school's existing IT infrastructure? How does the ICT department ensure the technical reliability and security of EdTech platforms used in the school? What strategies are in place to support technical issues related to EdTech platforms that staff might encounter? As a school, how do you use the data generated from your digital platforms? For example, at the level of school, department or individual teacher? Has / how has this changed over time?
10–15 mins	Topic area 4 – Training and support As their roles have evolved with the expansion of digital platforms in your school, how do you encourage the responsible use of these technologies by staff? Does / how does the ICT department support teachers in developing their technical skills and confidence in using EdTech platforms effectively? How does the ICT department address the varying levels of technical expertise among teachers when providing support for EdTech integration? What professional development is offered to teachers to stay up to date on the latest EdTech advancements?
5–10 mins	Close of interview

Time	Topic areas and questions
	Open question: Is there anything else that you would like to say about the use of digital platforms in your school or the wider educational landscape? Express gratitude and thank the participant for their time and contributions. Explain how their answers will help the research. Any questions for me? Discuss future plans and the potential for further contact (if necessary).

Trade union (regional official)

Time	Topic areas and questions
5 mins	Topic area 1 – Introductions Re-emphasise confidentiality, anonymity and freedom to withdraw. Could you please start by providing your name, job title and a brief description of your role? It would also be useful if you could outline the nature of the union's work and its structure.
5–10 mins	Topic area 2 – Training and support Are you aware of any trends in teacher workload or well-being related to the increased use of EdTech platforms in schools? How has evidence of this presented itself? Has, for example, the union undertaken specific research in this area?
10–15 mins	Topic area 3 – Teacher–manager relations The role of teachers has been changed by the widespread use of these technologies in schools. What are the biggest challenges faced by your members when it comes to integrating EdTech tools into their existing practice?
10–15 mins	Topic area 4 – Data use and transparency Do you have, or are you aware of, any concerns about EdTech platform data being increasingly used as a tool for teacher surveillance, increased monitoring or managerial control? What role, if any, does the union have in ensuring that EdTech data is used fairly and ethically in teacher standards evaluation and performance management? For example, when members are going through pay scale thresholds.
10–15 mins	Topic area 5 – Selection and implementation Academisation has afforded greater freedoms and autonomy to schools/academy chains. Do you have a view on the role, if any, this programme has had on the adoption, and accountabilities, of private-sector EdTech providers in state schools? In what way(s) does the union work with educational policymakers to ensure that EdTech is implemented in a manner that supports both teachers and wider school communities? This might extend beyond usage practices to policy formulation and governance.
5–10 mins	Close of interview Open question: Is there anything else that you would like to say about the use of digital platforms in schools or the wider educational landscape? Express gratitude and thank the participant for their time and contributions. Any questions for me? Explain how their answers will help the research. Discuss future plans and the potential for further contact (if necessary).

Appendix C2: Larwood School (Local Authority) schedule

Classroom teachers

Time	Topic areas and questions
5 mins	Topic area 1 – Introductions Re-emphasise confidentiality, anonymity and freedom to withdraw. Could you please start by providing your name, job title and a brief description of your role at the school and across its campuses?
5–10 mins	Topic area 2 – The pandemic and its legacy What was it like working during the pandemic, in terms of both remote teaching and the return to school? (Prompt: the systems and platforms you used; the use of physical spaces.) Which of the technologies adopted during that period have been retained since, and how are they now used?
5–10 mins	Topic area 3 – Platform usage Which digital platforms do you currently use in your role? What training, if any, have you received to use them? In what ways do you find them beneficial and/or challenging in your daily work?
10–15 mins	Topic area 4 – Data, surveillance, control and accountability How is the data generated by these platforms used in the school? Who manages it? How, if at all, have your professional accountabilities changed since the school adopted these platforms? Do you have any concerns about platform data being used to monitor or evaluate your work?
5–10 mins	Topic area 5 – Physical spaces and sociomateriality Do you use a central staffroom or other communal spaces during breaks, lunch or PPA time? If so, why do you go there? How well frequented are these spaces by staff, and have these patterns changed?
5–10 mins	Topic area 6 – Productivity and efficiency To what extent have digital platforms made you more efficient in your role, and how? How do you feel about your workload and timetabling constraints?
5–10 mins	Topic area 7 – Management culture and the local-authority context How would you describe the management style, culture and structures at the school? What do you see as their predominant focus, and how far does data feature in their approach? Do you have any views on working in a local-authority-maintained school as opposed to an academy? (Prompt: for those with prior academy experience, any comparative reflections.)
5 mins	Topic area 8 –Close of interview Open question: Is there anything else you would like to say about your role, the use of digital platforms at the school, or your experience of working in a local-authority-maintained school? Express gratitude and thank the participant for their time and contributions. Any questions for me? Explain how their answers will help the research. Discuss future plans and the potential for further contact (if necessary).

Middle leaders / Heads of Department and Heads of Year

Time	Topic areas and questions
5 mins	Topic area 1 – Introductions Re-emphasise confidentiality, anonymity and freedom to withdraw. Could you please start by providing your name, job title and a brief description of your role at the school and across its campuses?
5–10 mins	Topic area 2 – The pandemic and its legacy What was it like leading your department or year team through the pandemic, across both remote provision and the return to school? (Prompt: systems and platforms; physical spaces.) Which technologies adopted then have been retained, and why?
5–10 mins	Topic area 3 – Platform usage Which platforms do you use in your leadership role and across your department or year group? What training and support are in place for you and your team? In what ways are they beneficial and/or challenging?
10–15 mins	Topic area 4 – Data, surveillance, control and accountability How are platform data used across the school and within your area? Who manages the data? How, if at all, have your own and your team's professional accountabilities changed since platformisation? Do you have any concerns about how these data are used?
10–15 mins	Topic area 5 – Using data to lead and manage Are there examples where you use platform data to manage your department or team, or individual members of staff? How do you feel about this? To what extent has the school's local-authority status shaped its adoption of different technologies? (Prompt: finance, autonomy, the role of the governing body.) How much say do you have over which platforms the school adopts?
5–10 mins	Topic area 6 – Physical spaces and sociomateriality Do you and your team use a central staffroom or other communal spaces during breaks, lunch or PPA time? Why, or why not? How well frequented are these spaces, and have these patterns changed?
5–10 mins	Topic area 7 – Productivity, efficiency and workload To what extent have digital platforms made you and your team more efficient, and how? How do you feel about workload and timetabling constraints across your area?
5–10 mins	Topic area 8 – Management culture and the local-authority context How would you describe the management style, culture and structures at the school, and their predominant focus? Do you have any views on working in a local-authority-maintained school as opposed to an academy?
5 mins	Close of interview Open question: Is there anything else you would like to say about your role, the use of digital platforms at the school, or your experience of working in a local-authority-maintained school? Express gratitude and thank the participant for their time and contributions. Any questions for me? Explain how their answers will help the research. Discuss future plans and the potential for further contact (if necessary).

Technical systems manager

Time	Topic areas and questions
5 mins	Topic area 1 – Introductions Re-emphasise confidentiality, anonymity and freedom to withdraw. Could you please start by providing your name, job title and a brief description of your role at the school and across its campuses?
10–15 mins	Topic area 2 – The pandemic and the technology legacy How did the pandemic shape the technologies in use at the school today? Which platforms were adopted at that time, and which have been retained, and why?
10–15 mins	Topic area 3 – Platform usage, selection and implementation Which platforms does the school use, and what is your role in managing them? Can you describe the process for selecting and implementing platforms? To what extent has the school's local-authority status shaped these decisions? (Prompt: finance, procurement, autonomy, the governing body.) How much say do staff have in what is adopted?
10–15 mins	Topic area 4 – Technical integration, reliability and security What challenges and opportunities arise in integrating these platforms with the school's existing IT infrastructure? How do you ensure their technical reliability and security? What support is in place for staff who encounter technical issues?
10–15 mins	Topic area 5 – Data management and use How are the data generated by platforms managed and used across the school? Who has access, and how is that governed? Has this changed over time? Do you have any reflections on how these data are used to monitor work?
5–10 mins	Topic area 6 – Training and support How do you support staff in developing their confidence and skills with these platforms? What professional development or technical guidance is offered?
5 mins	Close of interview Open question: Is there anything else you would like to say about your role, the use of digital platforms at the school, or your experience of working in a local-authority-maintained school? Express gratitude and thank the participant for their time and contributions. Any questions for me? Explain how their answers will help the research. Discuss future plans and the potential for further contact (if necessary).

Support and operational staff

Time	Topic areas and questions
5 mins	Topic area 1 – Introductions

Time	Topic areas and questions
	Re-emphasise confidentiality, anonymity and freedom to withdraw. Could you please start by providing your name, job title and a brief description of your role at the school and across its campuses?
5–10 mins	Topic area 2 – The pandemic and its legacy What was it like carrying out your role during the pandemic, across both the remote period and the return to school? (Prompt: the systems and platforms you used; the use of physical spaces.) Which technologies adopted then have been retained?
5–10 mins	Topic area 3 – Platform usage and training Which digital platforms do you use in your role, and how central are they to your day-to-day work? What training, if any, have you received to use them?
5–10 mins	Topic area 4 – Data, accountability and how your work is recorded How is the data generated by these platforms used in relation to your role? How, if at all, have the ways your work is recorded or monitored changed since the school adopted them? Do you have any concerns about this?
5–10 mins	Topic area 5 – Physical spaces and sociomateriality Do you use a central staffroom or other communal spaces during the day? If so, why do you go there? How well frequented are these spaces by staff, and have these patterns changed?
5–10 mins	Topic area 6 – Productivity and efficiency To what extent have digital platforms made you more efficient in your role, and how? How do you feel about your workload?
5–10 mins	Topic area 7 – Management culture and the local-authority context How would you describe the management style, culture and structures at the school, and their predominant focus? Do you have any views on working in a local-authority-maintained school as opposed to an academy?
5 mins	Topic area 8 – Close of interview Open question: Is there anything else you would like to say about your role, the use of digital platforms at the school, or your experience of working in a local-authority-maintained school? Express gratitude and thank the participant for their time and contributions. Any questions for me? Explain how their answers will help the research. Discuss future plans and the potential for further contact (if necessary).

Appendix D: Documentary sources from case study schools

Table D1: Documentary sources from Matson Academy – grouped by category

Code	Document title	Date	Analytical relevance
<i>Trust and school governance</i>			
D1	Strategic Plan 2024–2026	March 2026	Sets institutional priorities, strategic vision and objectives
D2	Scheme of Delegation	September 2024	Sets out delegated decision-making powers and accountability structures across the MAT
D3	Trust newsletters / updates	Dec 2023 – May 2024	Provides insight into trust-level priorities, discourse and governance narratives
D4	Local governing body minutes	Nov 2023 – Apr 2024	Documents oversight, accountability discussions and decision-making processes
D5	Local Authority guidance for MATs	March 2024	Provides comparative baseline for governance outside MAT structures
<i>School policies</i>			
D6	ICT and Acceptable Use of Mobile Phones Policy	June–July 2024	Defines rules governing ICT use, surveillance, monitoring and disciplinary procedures; illustrates formal regulation of digital conduct
D7	Behaviour for Learning Policy	January 2024	Establishes expectations for conduct, discipline and monitoring; relevant to normative regulation and surveillance
D8	Assessment and Data Policy	February 2024	Defines data collection, tracking and reporting practices; central to platform governance and performativity
D9	Performance Management / Appraisal Policy	November 2023	Links data to evaluation and professional pay progression
D10	Online Safety Policy	June 2024	Formal institutional framework for digital monitoring and safeguarding; anchors advisory materials within enforceable practice
D11	CCTV Policy	July 2025	Defines use of visual surveillance systems; integrates physical monitoring into digital governance infrastructure
<i>Trust policies</i>			
D12	Curriculum and Learning – Trust Statement	September 2024	Sets out pedagogical principles, performance management expectations and alignment with Ofsted frameworks; indicates normative expectations around teaching and accountability
D13	Online Safety – Trust Statement	September 2024	Provides trust-level expectations around online conduct, safeguarding and duty of care; aligns school practice with centralised MAT governance

Code	Document title	Date	Analytical relevance
<i>External evaluation</i>			
D14	Ofsted Inspection Report	December 2023	Provides external assessment of school performance, expectations and accountability pressures shaping organisational priorities
<i>Compliance and data protection</i>			
D15	Safeguarding and data protection policies	February 2024	Illustrates legal-regulatory framing of data use and monitoring
D16	Data Protection Policy v1	September 2024	Establishes GDPR compliance framework, including lawful processing, storage, retention and breach protocols
D17	GDPR Privacy Notice – Wi-Fi BYOD	Aug–Sept 2024	Specifies monitoring and data capture linked to personal device use on school networks
D18	Privacy Notice for Suppliers of Goods and Services	August 2024	Documents data practices applied to external contractors; extends governance beyond direct employees
D19	Privacy Notice – Applicants	August 2024	Outlines recruitment-related data processing; evidences early-stage datafication of professional trajectories
D20	Privacy Notice – Parents (own data)	August 2024	Details processing of parental personal data; extends governance to wider stakeholders
D21	Privacy Notice – Parents (child's data)	August 2024	Defines parental access to pupil data; highlights data-sharing and mediated visibility
D22	Privacy Notice – Pupils	August 2024	Specifies categories of student data collected (attainment, behaviour, safeguarding, digital activity); central to monitoring and profiling
D23	Privacy Notice – Trustees, local boards, volunteers	August 2024	Documents data processing for governance actors; extends datafication into oversight structures
D24	Privacy Notice – Workforce	August 2024	Details staff data collection and monitoring; reinforces managerial oversight through data systems
<i>Staff guidance and internal communications</i>			
D25	CPD / Professional Development Framework	April 2024	Indicates how expertise and ‘good practice’ are constructed and disseminated
D26	Internal staff guidance (platform use)	May 2024	Specifies expectations for platform engagement, data entry and compliance routines
D27	Staff briefing communications (emails, bulletins)	Nov 2023 – June 2024	Reveals how expectations are communicated, reinforced and normalised in everyday practice
<i>Operational documentation</i>			
D28	Timetabling / organisational routines documentation	January 2024	Shows how digital systems are embedded in daily organisational practice

Code	Document title	Date	Analytical relevance
D29	Staff rooming reports	January 2024	
<i>Online safety advisory materials (parental guidance)</i>			
D30	Instagram Parents Guide	June 2024	Encourages parental monitoring of social media use; extends governance into domestic contexts
D31	Internet Matters Gaming Guide to Support Young People	June 2024	Frames risks associated with online gaming; promotes parental oversight strategies
D32	Internet Matters Guide: Online Safety for Parents of Children 11–13	June 2024	Reinforces supervision and control practices for younger adolescents
D33	Internet Matters Parents Age Guide 14+	June 2024	Addresses Key Stage 4 students’ digital autonomy while maintaining emphasis on monitoring
D34	Internet Matters TikTok Guide	June 2024	Provides platform-specific monitoring strategies for short-form video use
D35	Internet Matters Tips: Set-up Safe Checklist	June 2024	Translates online safety discourse into practical parental control routines
D36	Kik Parents Guide	June 2024	Highlights risks of private messaging platforms; promotes vigilance and oversight
D37	Omegle Parents Guide	June 2024	Emphasises risks of anonymous interaction; reinforces surveillance narratives
D38	Oovoo Parents Guide	June 2024	Formal institutional framework for digital monitoring and safeguarding; anchors advisory materials within enforceable practice
D39	Snapchat Parents Guide	2024	Extends safeguarding discourse to video communication platforms
D40	WhatsApp Parents Guide	2024	Addresses ephemeral messaging and visibility challenges; promotes parental monitoring
D41	YouTube Parents Guide	2024	Highlights limits of institutional surveillance and reliance on parental governance

Table D2: Documentary sources from Larwood School – grouped by category

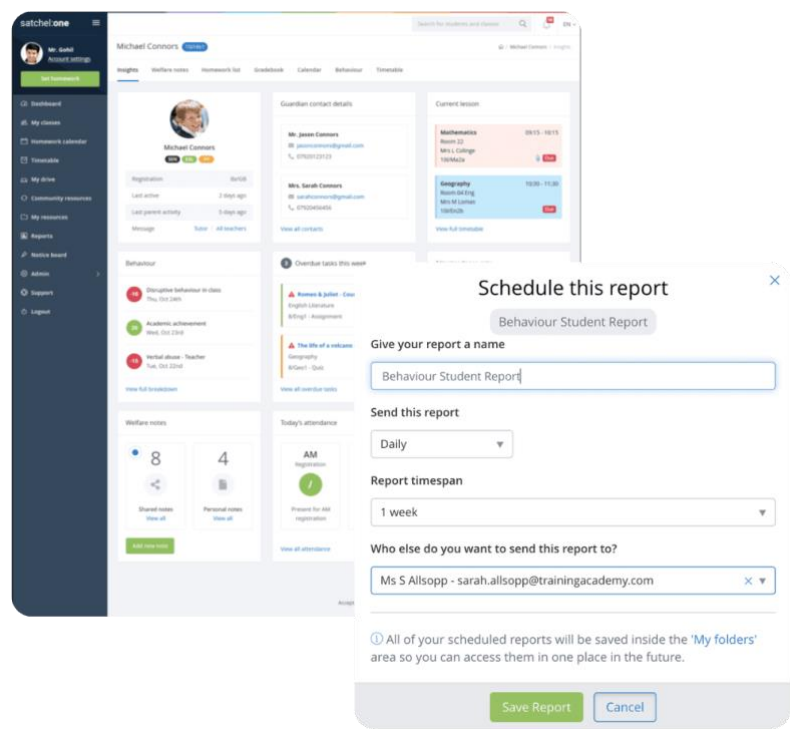
Code	Document title	Date	Analytical relevance
<i>School policies</i>			
D1	AI Policy	July 2025	Defines school approach to artificial intelligence use and the guiding principles of its permissible use by students and staff.

Code	Document title	Date	Analytical relevance
D2	Online Safety Policy	October 2025	Establishes framework for digital monitoring and staff use of work devices outside school.
D3	Behaviour and Culture Policy	October 2025	Sets out expectations for conduct, discipline and monitoring; relevant to normative regulation and acceptable behaviour.
D4	Curriculum Policy	October 2024	Sets out pedagogical principles and curriculum expectations; indicates normative framing of teaching practice.
D5	Attendance Policy	July 2025	Defines monitoring of attendance data; illustrates how digital platforms mediate routine administrative oversight.
D6	Remote Learning Policy	March 2026	Outlines expectations for digital platform use (including Google Classroom) in off-site learning contexts; illustrates normative embedding of platform infrastructure.
D7	Communication Policy	March 2025	Establishes expectations for staff–parent–student communication via digital channels.
<i>Compliance and data protection</i>			
D8	Data Protection Policy	November 2024	Establishes GDPR compliance framework including lawful processing, storage and monitoring; relevant to the datafication (staff and students).
D9	Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy	October 2025	Establishes safeguarding obligations and data-sharing expectations; relevant to the normative framing of digital monitoring.
D10	Privacy Notice	September 2024	Specifies categories of personal data collected from staff, students and parents; supports understanding of the scope of datafication.
<i>External evaluation</i>			
D11	Ofsted Report	March 2024	Provides external assessment of school performance and accountability pressures; shapes organisational priorities.
<i>Local authority and governance</i>			
D12	Local Authority guidance (schools)	2023–2024	Provides LA-level framework for digital governance, data protection and platform use; offers comparative baseline for non-MAT governance structures
D13	Governing body minutes	Nov 2023 – Apr 2024	Documents reveal decision-making processes linked to LA-maintained governance structures and their implications.
<i>Staff guidance and internal communications</i>			
D14	CPD / professional development materials	April 2024	Indicates how teachers are assessed as being effective practitioners.
D15	Department meeting notes	Nov 2023 – June 2024	Reveals how platform expectations are communicated at middle-leadership level; indicates variation in departmental compliance cultures

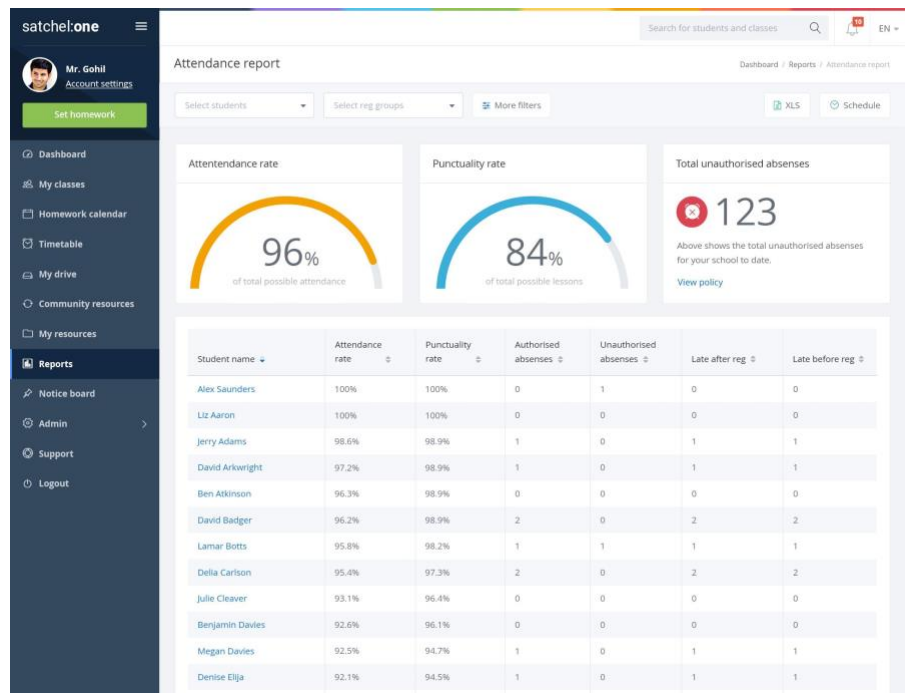
Code	Document title	Date	Analytical relevance
D16	Staff briefing communications (emails, bulletins)	Nov 2023 – June 2024	Documents how school expectations around platform use are reinforced and normalised through day-to-day communication.
<i>Operational documentation</i>			
D17	Timetabling and organisational routines documentation	January 2024	Shows how digital systems (including Google Classroom) are embedded in daily organisational practice.

Appendix E: Satchel One platform extracts

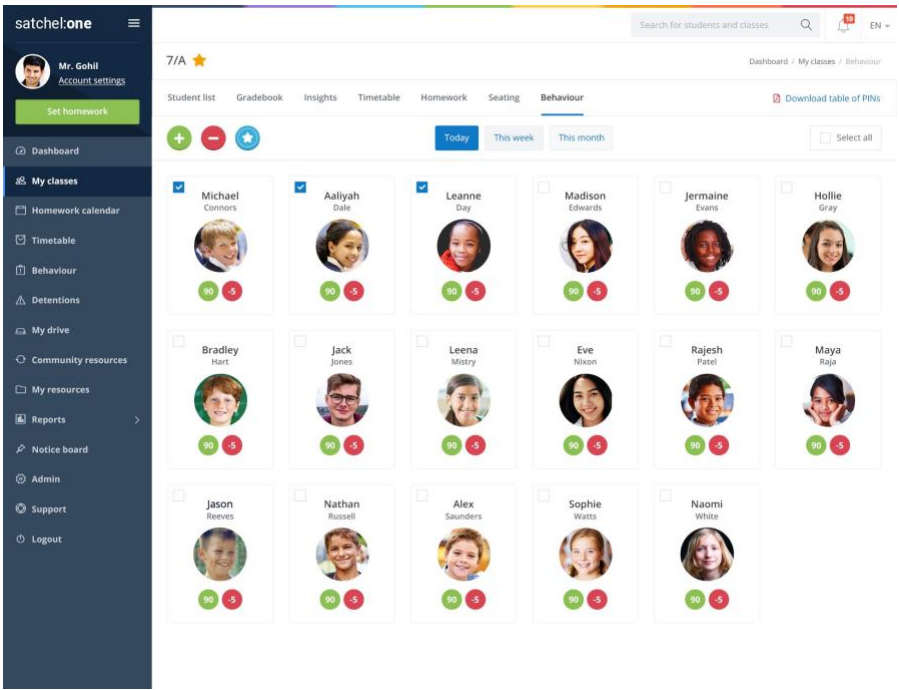
Extract E1: Reporting scheduling interface



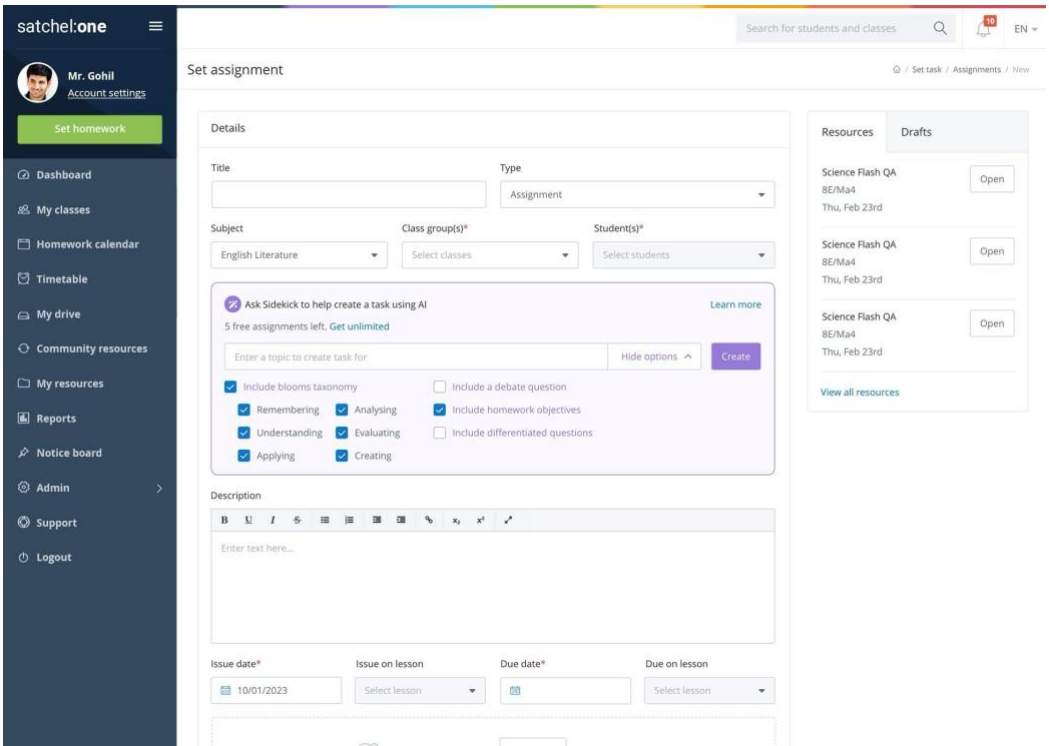
Extract E2: Attendance reporting interface



Extract E3: Behaviour reporting interface



Extract E4: Homework setting interface



Extract E5: Assessment tracking interface

Mr Monney

Account settings

+ Set task

Dashboard

My classes

Attendance

Behaviour

Detentions

Documents

Exams

Homework

Notice board

Reports

Satchel CPD

Timetable

Tools

10aGg

My classes / 10aGg / Assessment

Student listAssessmentGradebook

Search studentsSelect sexSelect inclusion groupsSave

Today21 May 20252024 Overview 11PR2

Student name	Art Prediction Yr 11 PR2	Business Prediction Yr 11 PR2	Comp Sci Prediction Yr 11 PR2	Drama Prediction Yr 11 PR2	Food Prediction Yr 11 PR2	Context comments Yr 11 PR2	DT Prediction Yr 11 PR2	English Language P... Yr 11 PR2	Eng Literature Predi... Yr 11 PR2	Citizenship Predicti... Yr 11 PR2	RE Prediction Yr 11 PR2	Geography Predicti... Yr 11 PR2
Bauch, Jeane	6+	5	5	6+	5							
Dooley, Ruthanne	7	7-	6	7	7-							
Feest, Humberto	5	4+	8+	5	4+		5+	5	5			
Howe, Abdul	5+	6	4	5+	6							
Jerde, Xuan	4	5	5	4	5							
Kling, Burl	5	8-	6	5	8-							
Kulas, Thi	7	3	4	7	3							

Extract E6: Messaging interface

Mr Young

Account settings

+ Set task

Exit Tools

Apps

Staff

Students

Parents & contacts

Parent directory

Contact directory

School

System

Parent directory

Actions

Parent name

Dr Barton, Cel

Mr Bashirian, E

Mx Bashirian, E

Mr Bechtelar, J

Mrs Bechtelar, J

Miss Bednar, E

Ms Bednar, Jun

Miss Beer, How

Send email

Total messages: 160

Recipients: 160 parents/carers

You have selected 3 users without an email address who will not receive this message.

Applied filters

- Year: Year 9
- Site access: Has site access

Details

Template

Reply-to address

noreply@teamsatchel.com

Subject

Message

Enter text here...

Site access

Actions

2025

Has site access

View

2024

Has site access

View

2025

Has site access

View

2024

Has site access

View

2025

Has site access

View

2024

Has site access

View

2025

Has site access

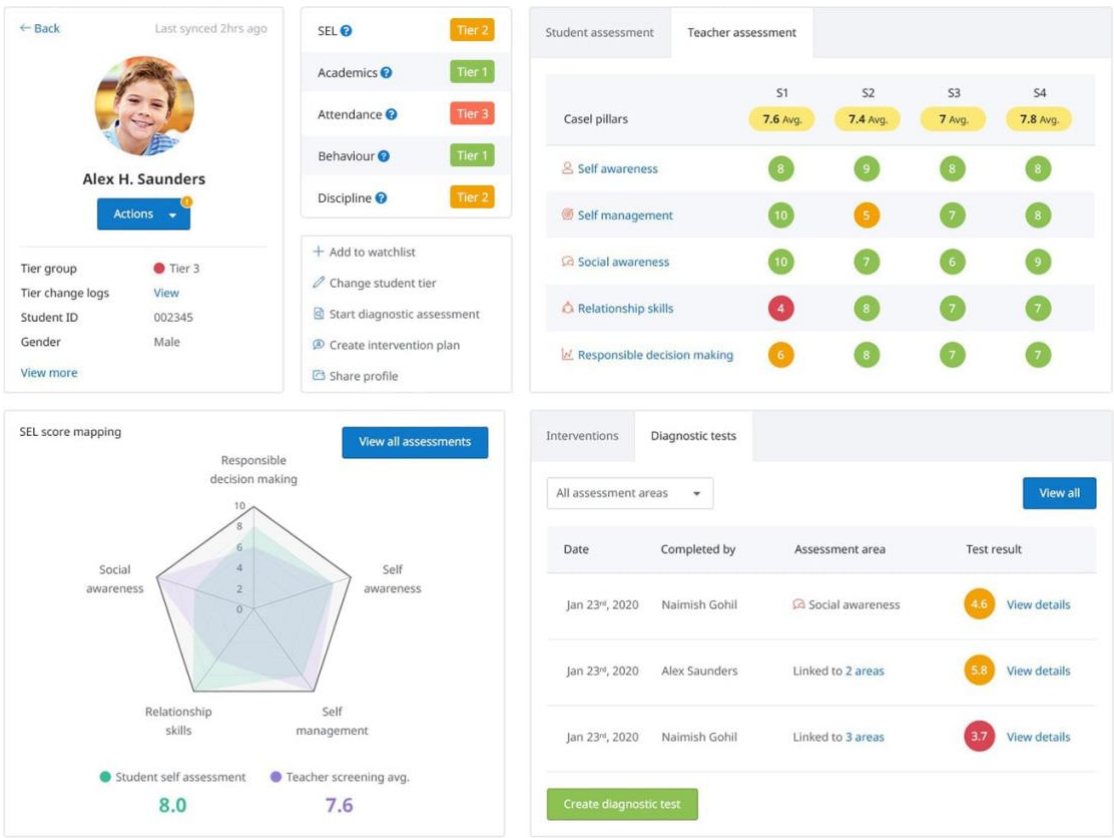
View

2024

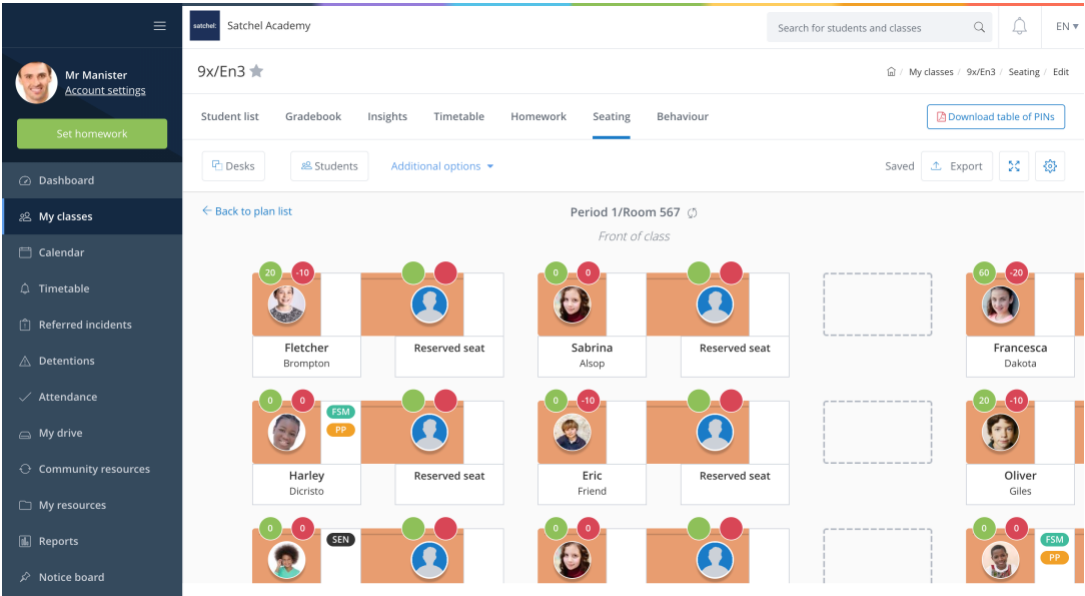
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View

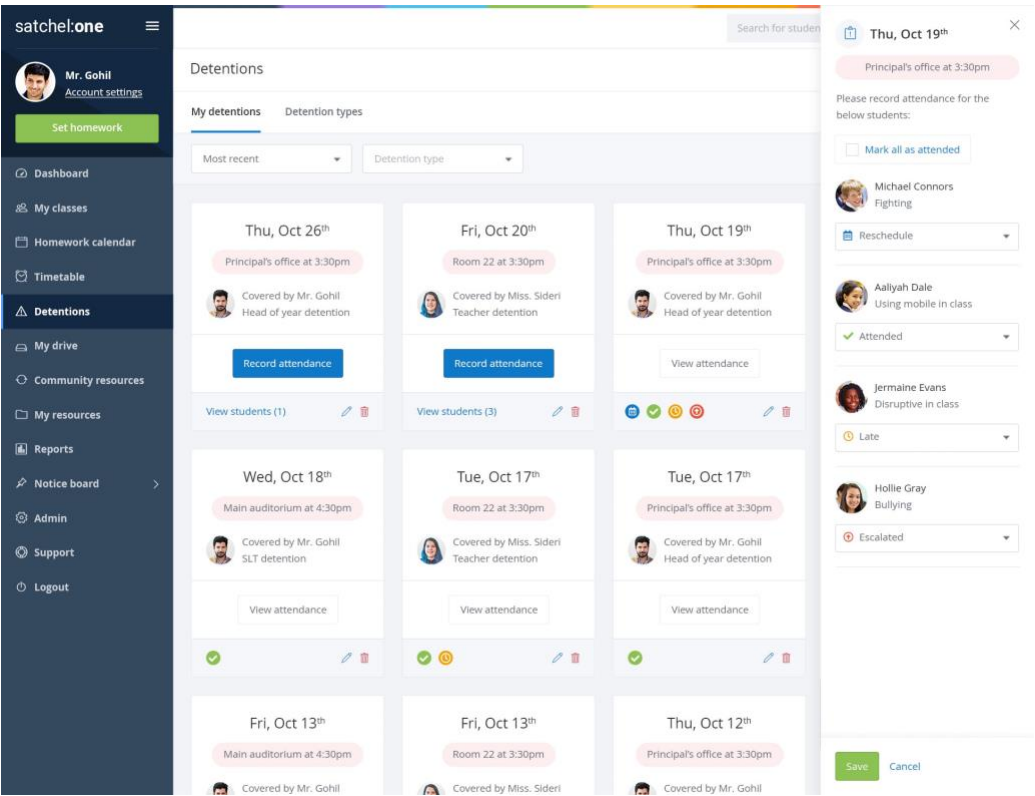
Extract E7: Student profile interface



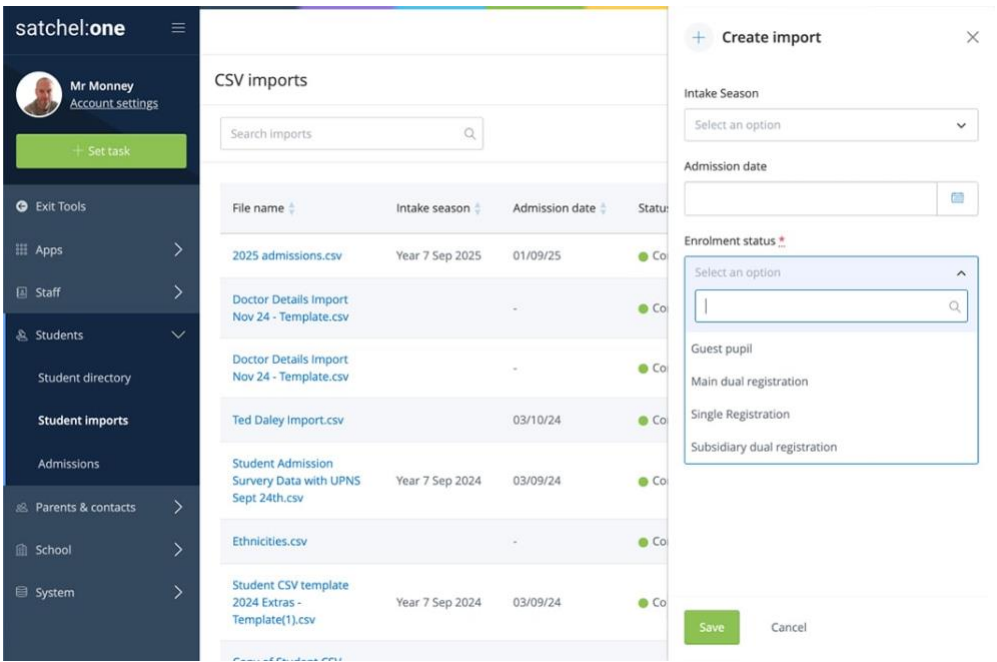
Extract E8: Seating plan interface



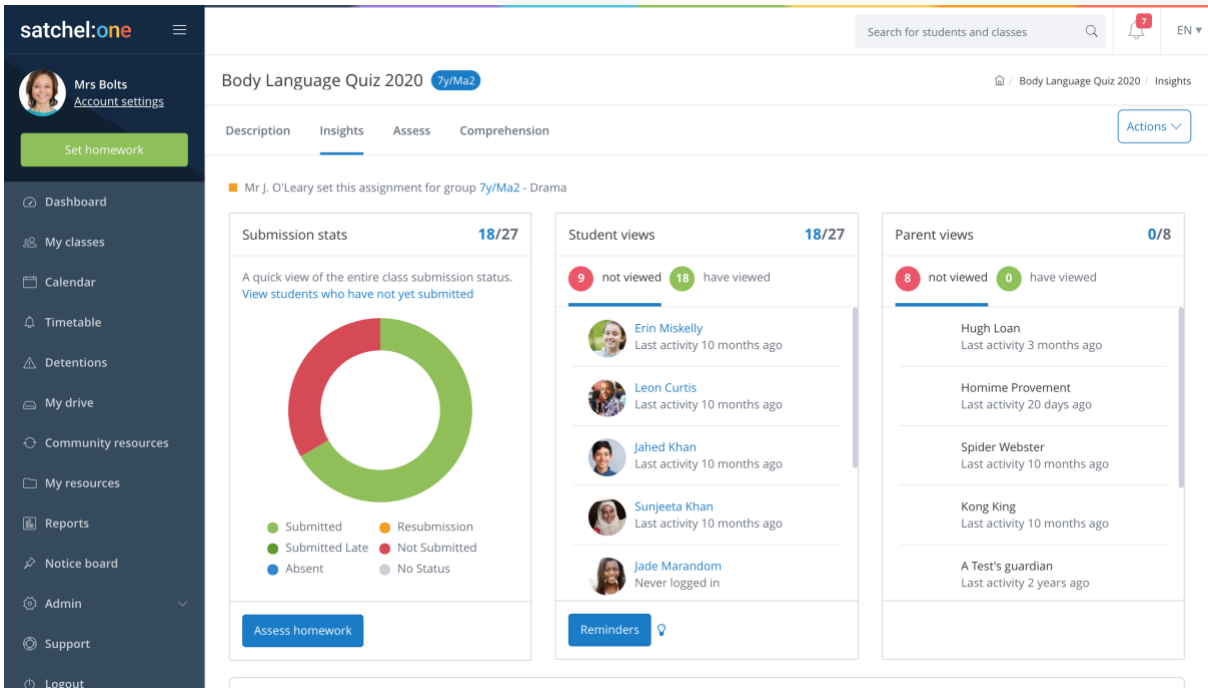
Extract E9: Detention tracking interface



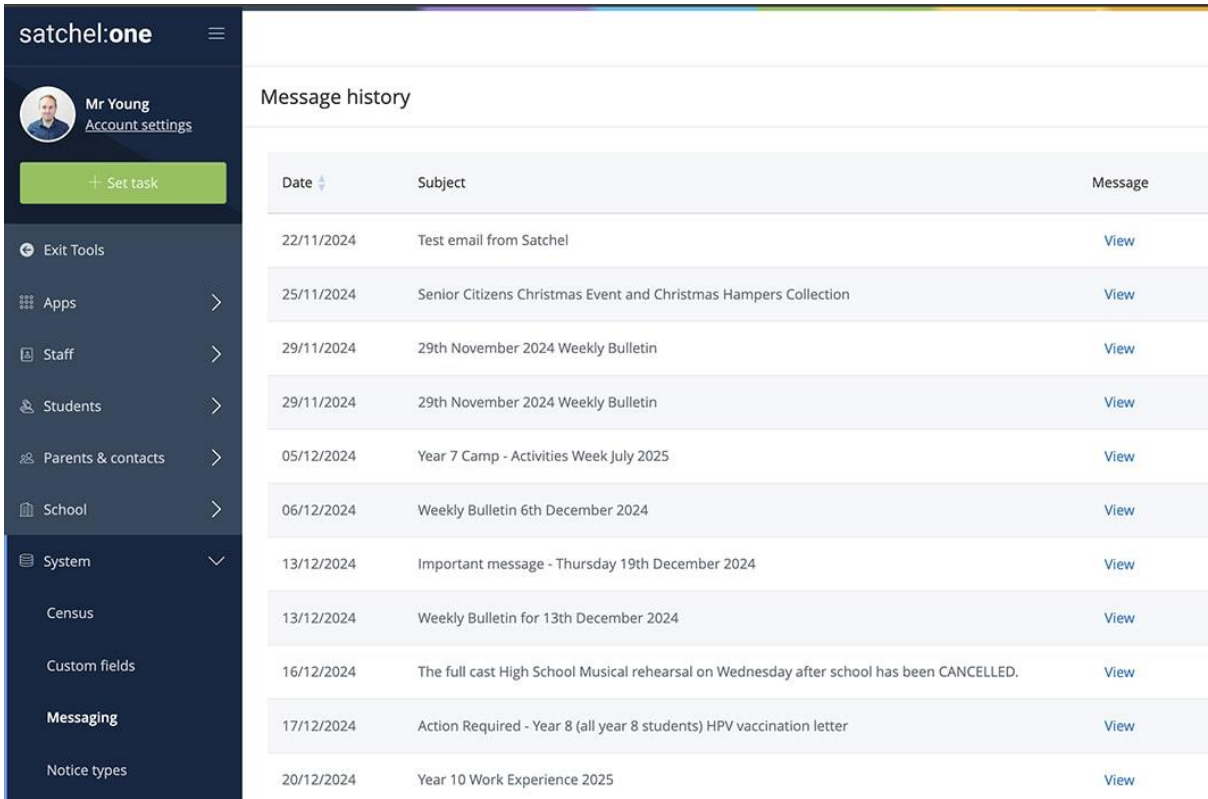
Extract E10: File importation interface



Extract E11: Insights interface with group submission statistics

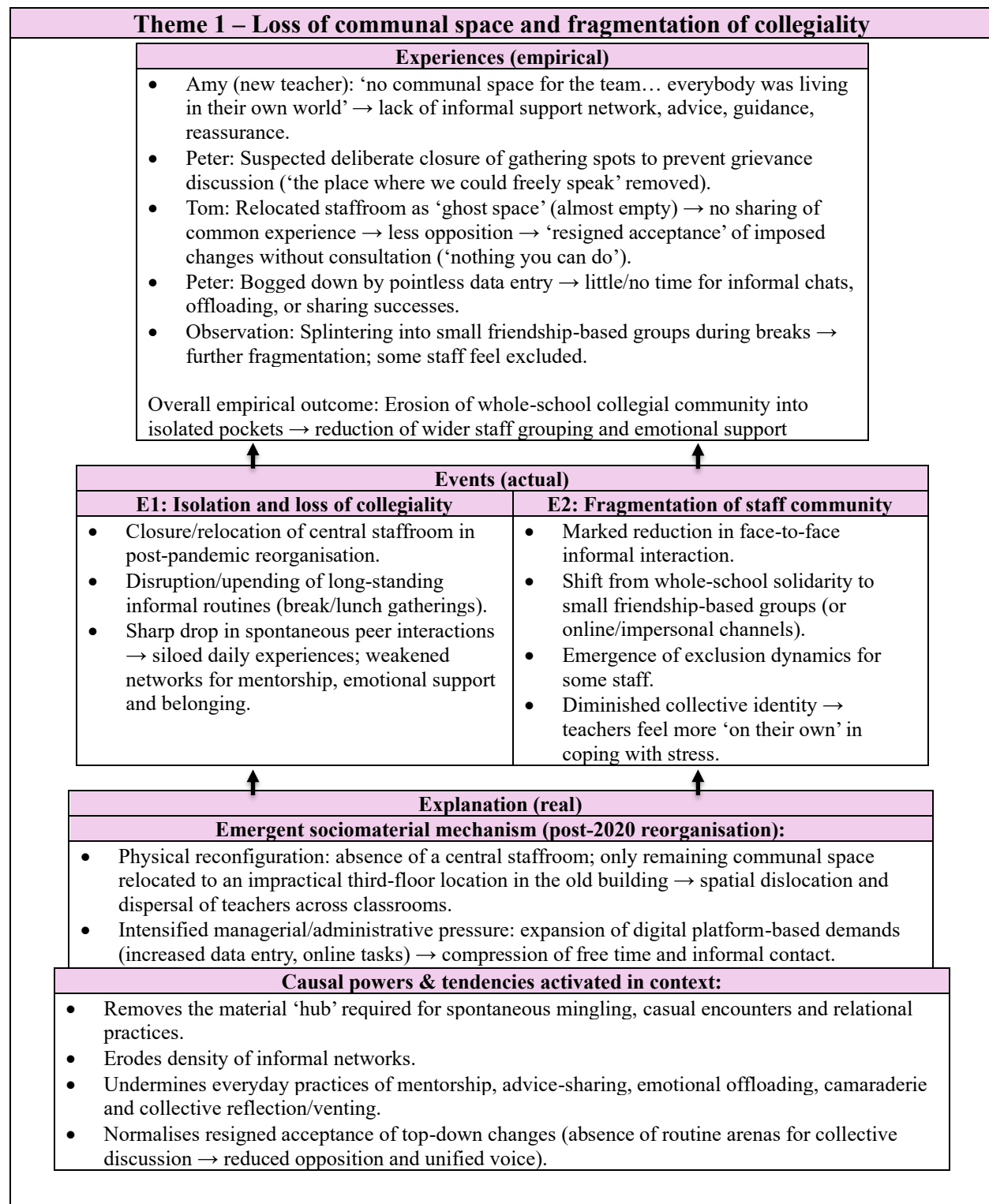


Extract E12: Message history interface

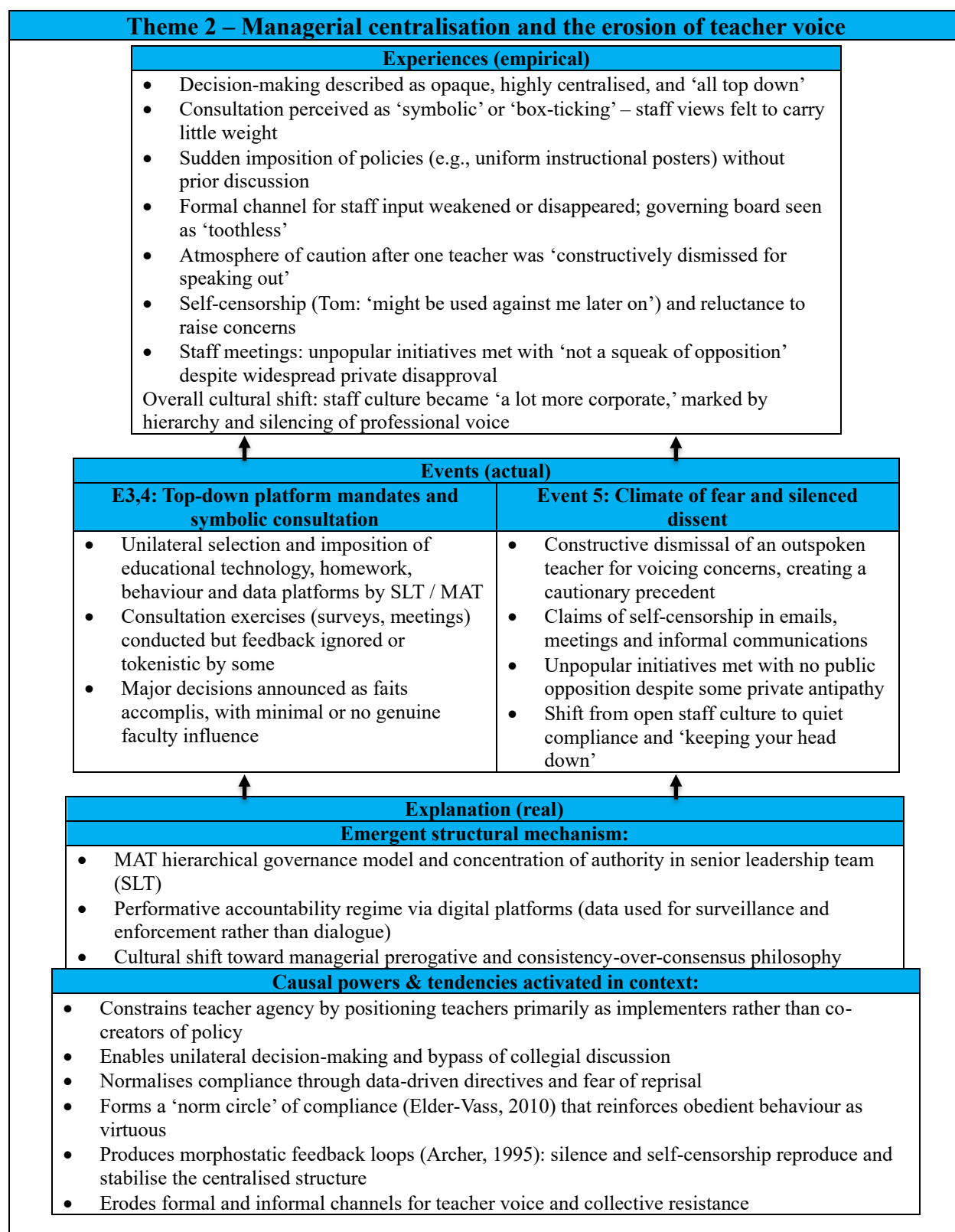


Appendix F: Stratified depth ontologies for Matson Academy themes

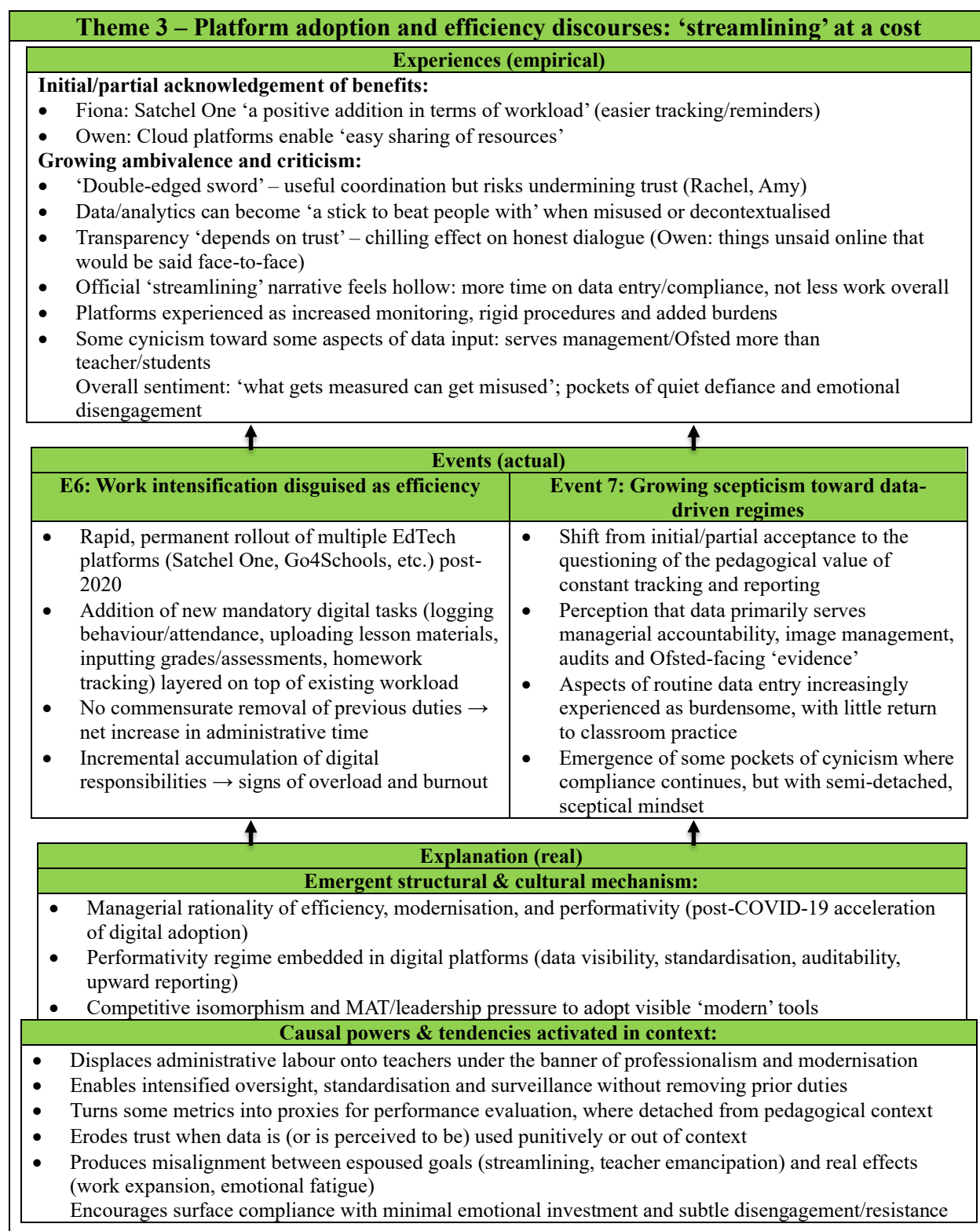
F1: Theme 1 – Loss of communal space and fragmentation of collegiality



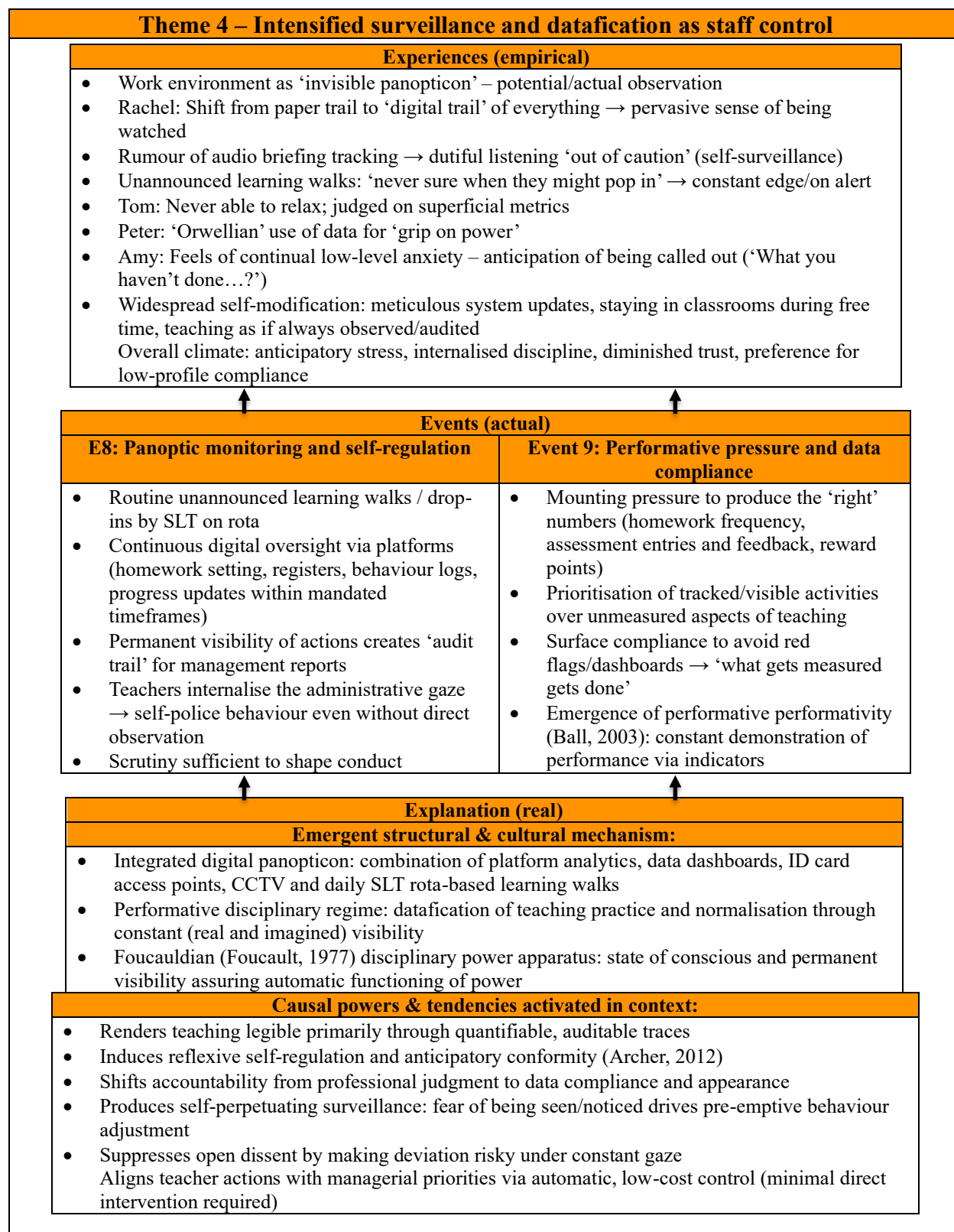
F2: Theme 2 – Managerial centralisation and the erosion of teacher voice



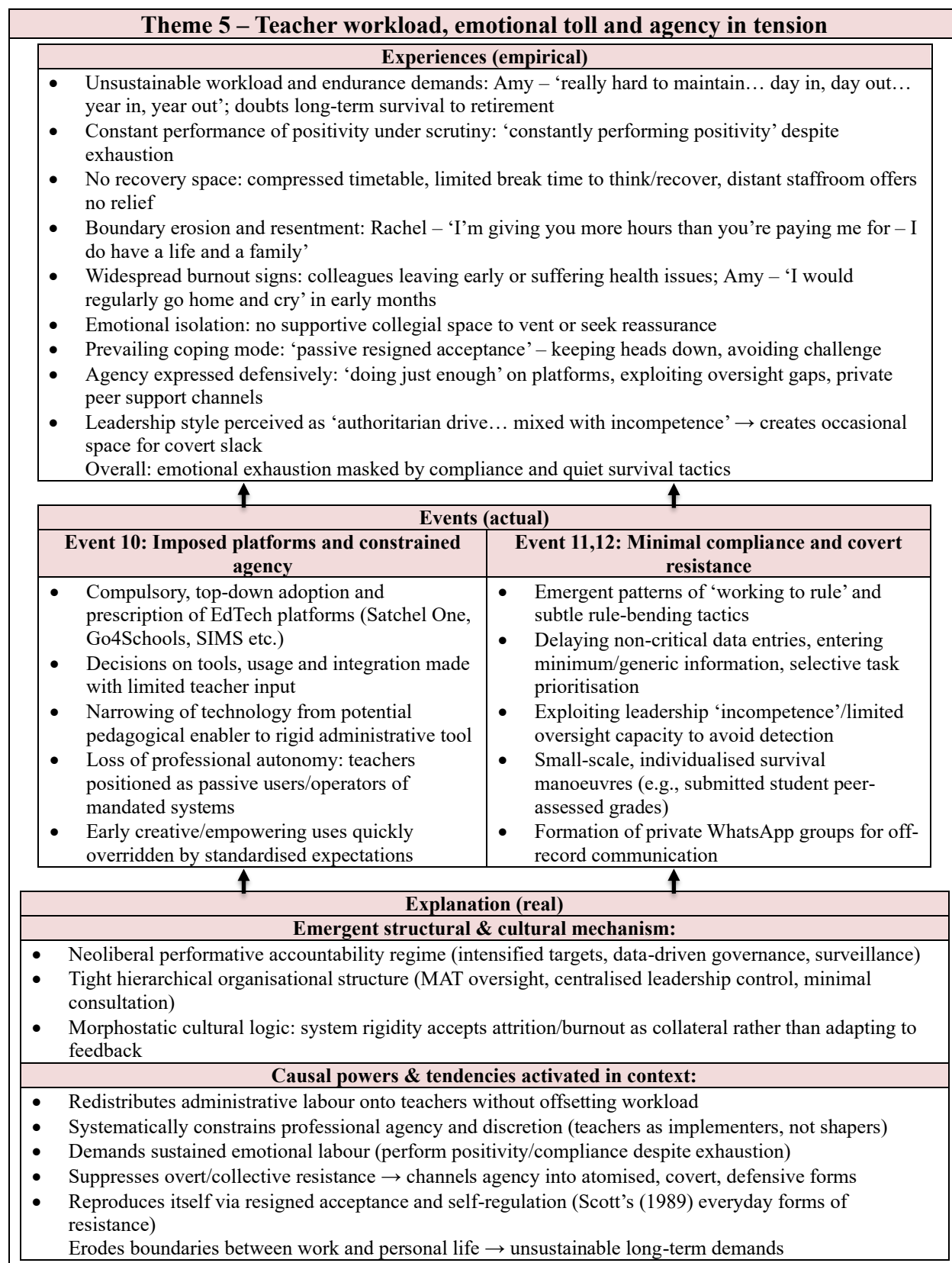
F3: Theme 3 – Platform adoption and efficiency discourses: ‘streamlining’ at a cost



F4: Theme 4 – Intensified surveillance and datafication as staff control

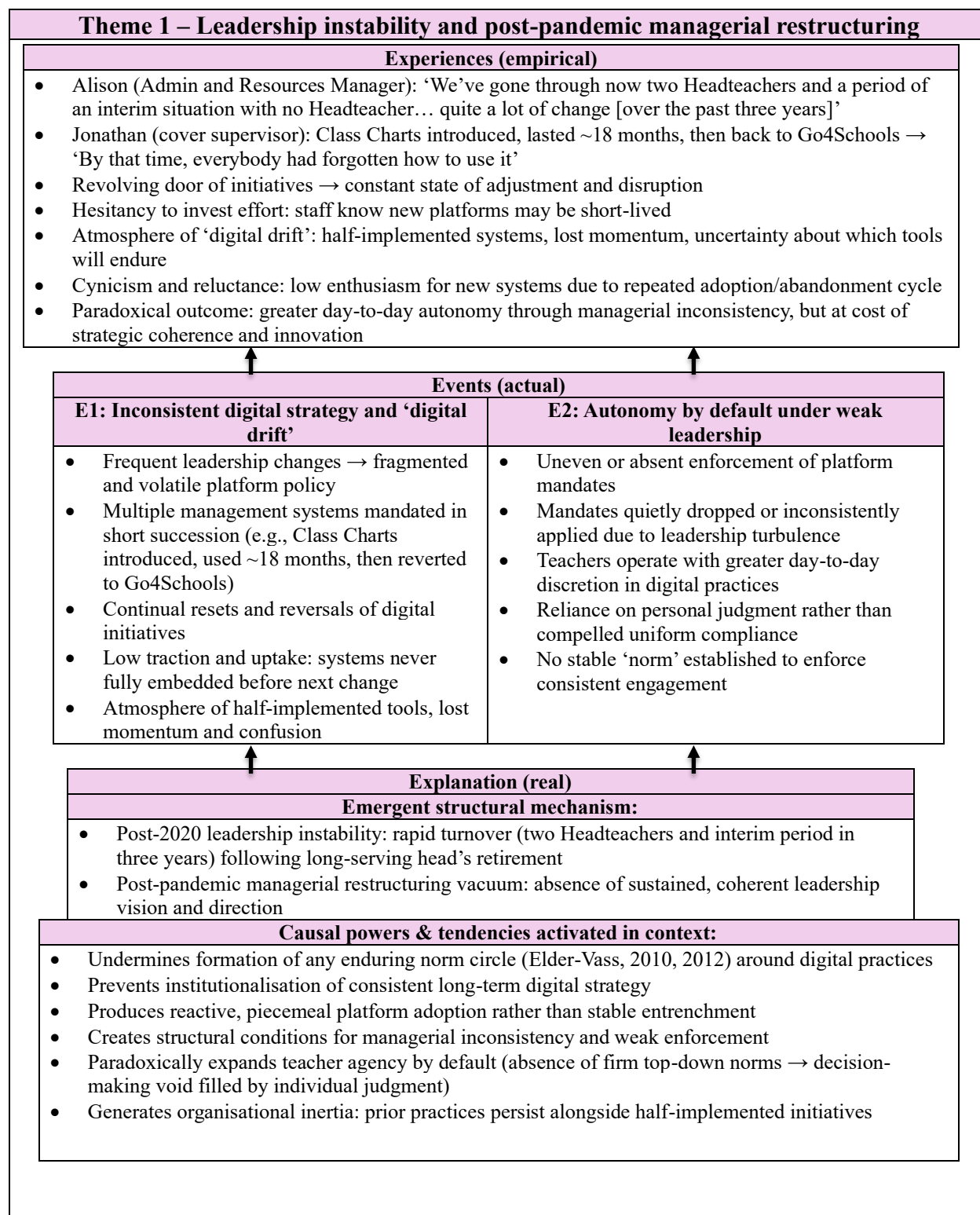


F5: Theme 5 – Teacher workload, emotional toll and agency in tension

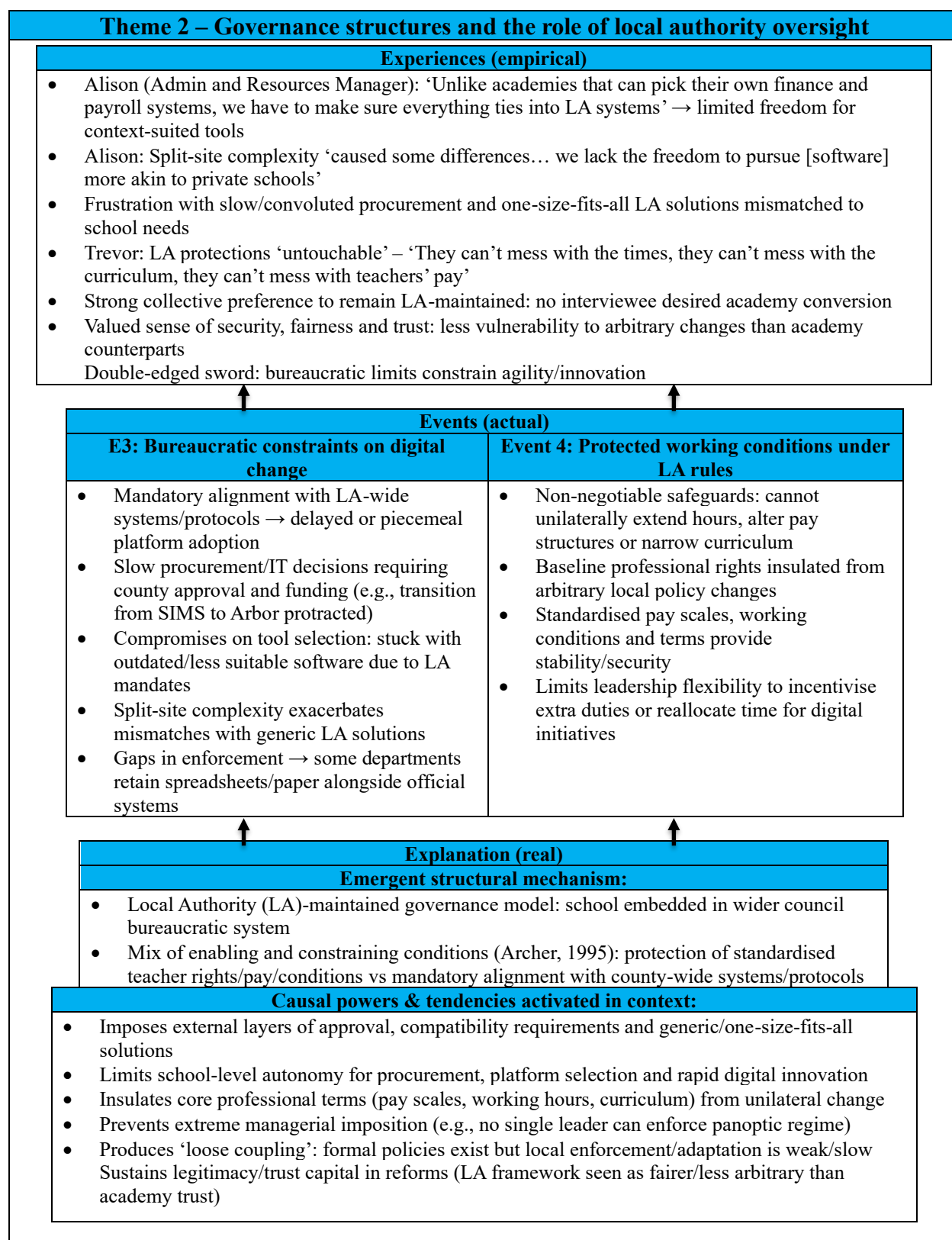


Appendix G: Stratified depth ontologies for Larwood School themes

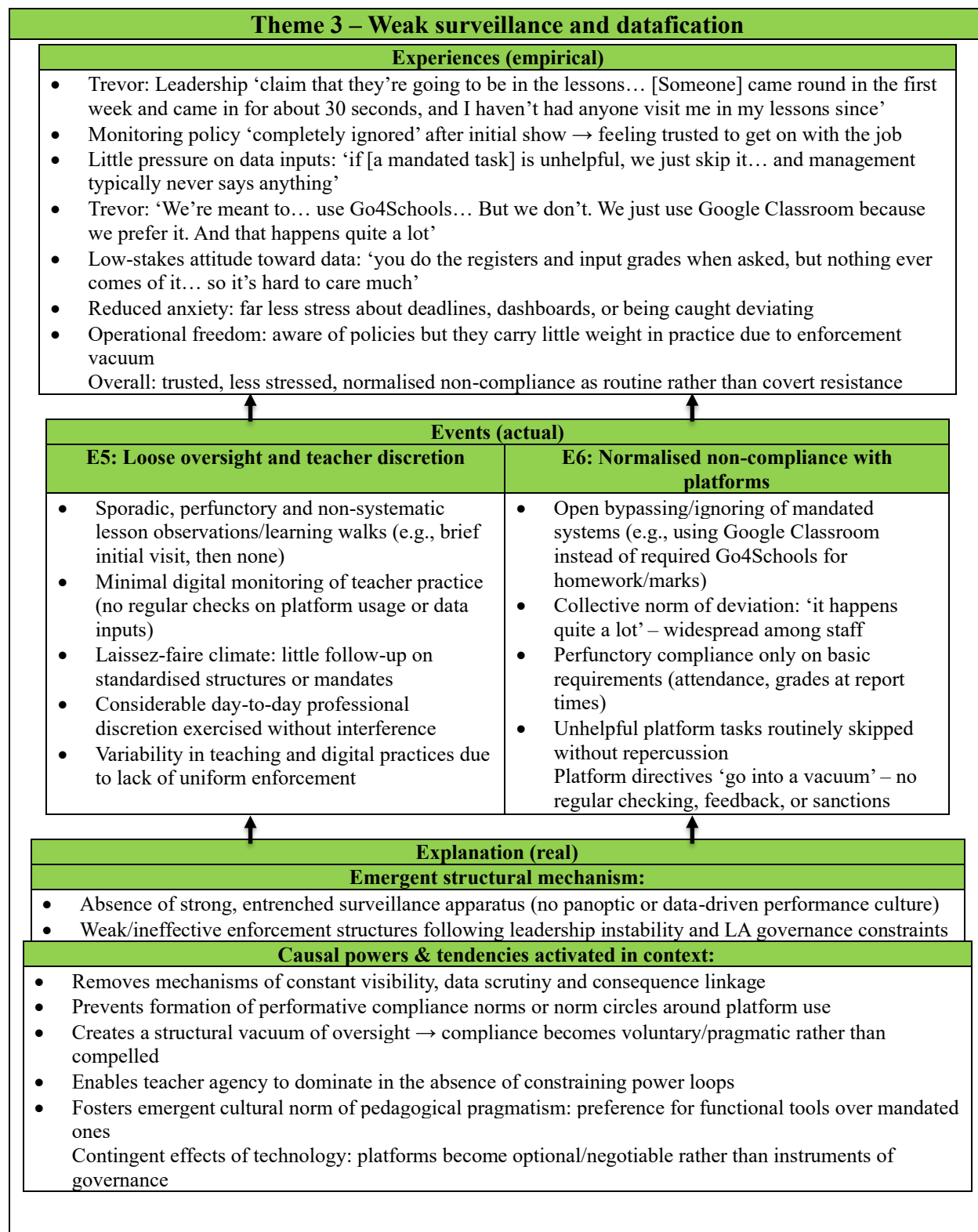
G1: Theme 1 – Leadership instability and post-pandemic managerial restructuring



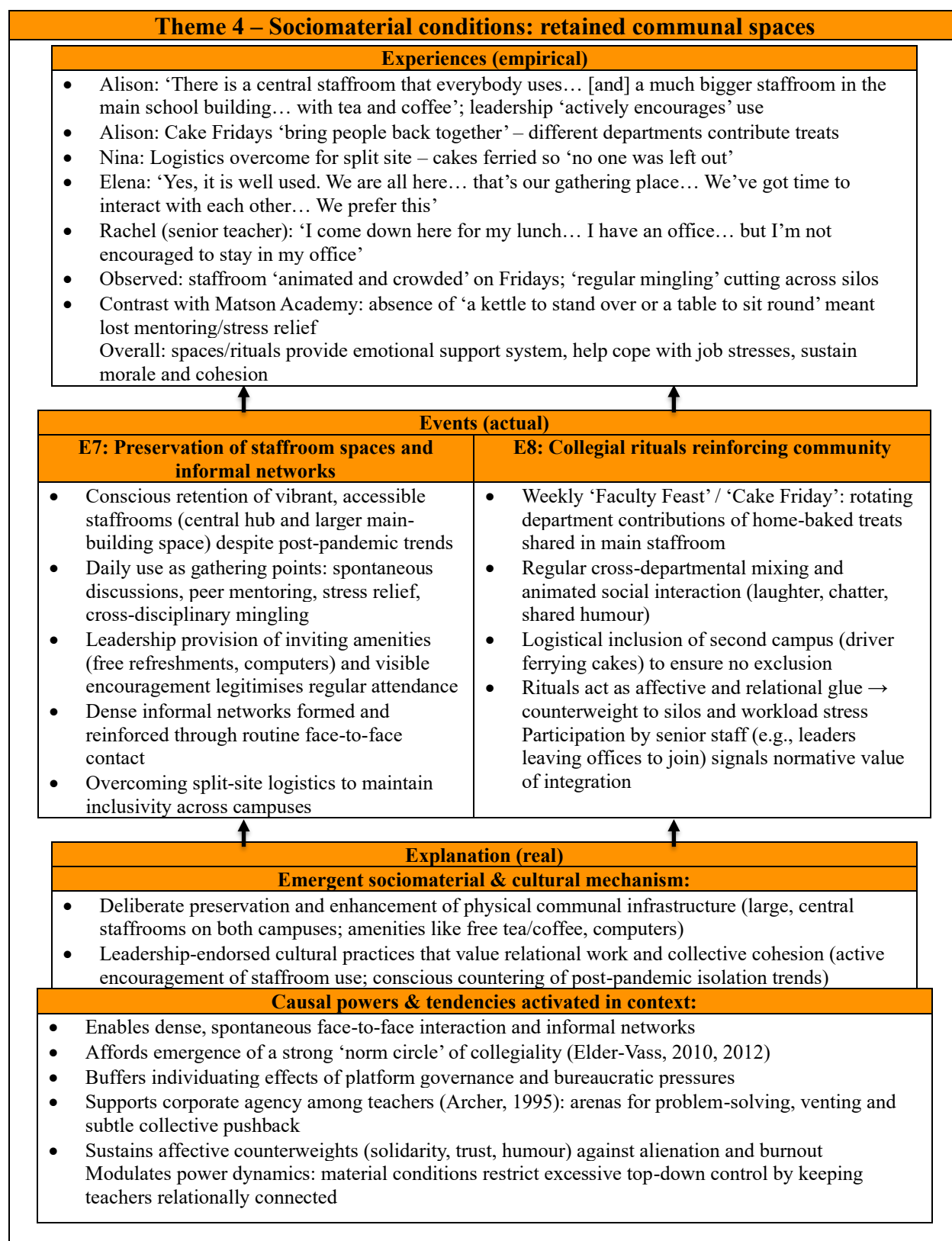
G2: Theme 2 – Governance structures and the role of local authority oversight



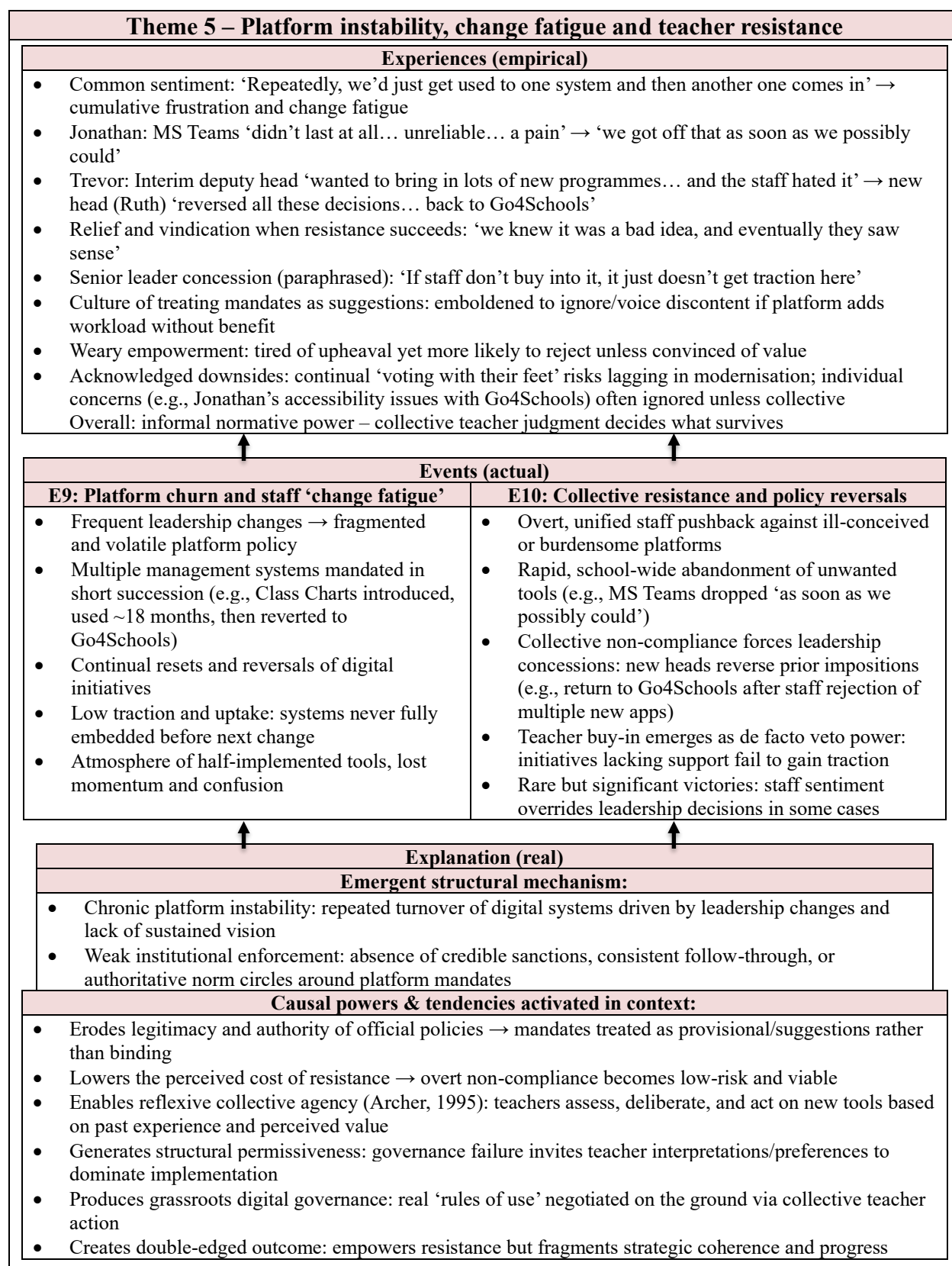
G3: Theme 3 – Weak surveillance and datafication



G4: Theme 4 – Sociomaterial conditions: retained communal spaces



G5: Theme 5 – Platform instability, change fatigue and teacher resistance



Appendix H: Structural and cultural emergent properties

Table H1: Structural conditioning factors (T₁) in Matson Academy vs Larwood School.

Structural Emergent Properties	Matson Academy	Larwood School
Governance model	Centralised MAT governance; corporatised management structure (Trust-led)	Decentralised LA governance; oversight by local council bureaucracy
Leadership continuity	Stable senior leadership (same CEO and Principal since 2019); coherent long-term strategy in place	Frequent leadership turnover (three headteachers since 2021); strategic direction fragmented and frequently reset
Financial autonomy	Significant financial autonomy (Academy freedoms) enabling proactive investment in platforms	Limited financial autonomy: budget and procurement often constrained by LA policies (e.g. compatibility requirements)
Platform infrastructure	Comprehensive, integrated platform suite (Satchel One, Go4Schools, SIMS) with high standardisation across school/Trust	Fragmented infrastructure (e.g. SIMS + Google Classroom + Go4Schools); Arbor MIS rollout delayed by 2020 cyber-attack and resource limits
Oversight and control mechanisms	Routine managerial surveillance embedded (daily learning walks, data dashboards, regular audits/reporting)	Minimal and ad hoc oversight; infrequent formal observation or data monitoring practices from SLT
Decision-making processes	Centralised, top-down decision-making; minimal teacher input or consultation in policy changes	Historically more consultative, though recently eroded; decision processes informal and inconsistent, some influenced externally by LA mandates
Spatial/material arrangements	Removal of communal staffrooms and social spaces; physical environment oriented toward individual work (fostering isolation)	Retention of communal staffrooms and social hubs; physical spaces explicitly support informal collaboration and collective staff presence

Table H2: Cultural conditioning factors (T₁) in Matson Academy vs Larwood School.

Cultural Emergent Properties	Matson Academy	Larwood School
Managerial ideology	Strong NPM-inspired managerial ethos; prioritises efficiency, performativity, and strict accountability	Traditional professional ethos; emphasises relational trust, teacher autonomy, and individual discretion
Orientation to data	Data treated as <i>knowledge products</i> (Blackler, 1995): formal, documented, digitally recorded and systematised. Data is produced to meet managerial requirements and mobilised centrally for accountability and compliance.	Data treated primarily as <i>knowledge processes</i> (Blackler, 1995): verbal, contextual and negotiated through everyday practice. Information circulates through staffroom and departmental dialogue, remaining

		locally embedded and largely resistant to central control.
Conception of professionalism	Professionalism equated with visibility (being seen to perform) – documentation, measurable outcomes, compliance with standards	Professionalism defined by autonomy and expertise – discretion in practice, relational competence, and personal judgment valued over metrics
Peer relationships	Formalised and individualised; spatial fragmentation means limited whole-staff cohesion (staff stick to small cliques or work in isolation)	Informal and socially embedded; sustained by communal spaces and a culture of cross-department interaction (strong sense of community)
Adaptation to change	Predominantly compliance-oriented – staff show minimal overt resistance to mandated changes (tend to internalise or quietly conform)	Pragmatically selective – staff engage with changes on their own terms; overt questioning is common and informal resistance is frequent when changes lack clear value

Appendix I: Comparative social interaction dynamics (T₂–T₃).

Aspect of teacher response	Matson Academy	Larwood School
Compliance	High – Strictly enforced via integrated platforms (real-time data tracking, routine department ‘health checks’ by SLT). Teachers comply with data entry and platform usage requirements consistently.	Moderate – Basic compliance with essential tasks, but platforms like Google Classroom are used more as pedagogical tools than surveillance instruments. Enforcement of digital routines is patchy.
Forms of Resistance	Covert, strategic minimalism – Resistance takes the form of quiet non-compliance: e.g. delaying data entries, inputting minimal data to meet requirements, superficially following protocols without genuine engagement. Open defiance is rare.	Openly selective non-compliance – Teachers feel free to bypass or ignore certain digital mandates (e.g. not using an optional platform feature) and express open scepticism. Informal ‘workarounds’ or outright skipping of non-critical tasks are common and discussed amongst staff.
Negotiated Autonomy	Limited – Teachers’ autonomy is tightly constrained by prescriptive managerial mandates and a comprehensive data regime. Little room to modify platform use to personal preference; autonomy is mainly exercised in private, subversive ways.	Considerable – Fragmented leadership and lax oversight provide openings for teachers to exercise professional judgment. Many decisions about how to teach or use tech are effectively left to individual or departmental discretion, yielding a high degree of de facto autonomy in daily work.
Dominant Reflexive Mode (Archer, 2003)	Pragmatic reflexivity ²⁴ – Teachers tend to reflexively prioritise job security and immediate practical outcomes. They comply and adjust behaviour to ‘get through’ the demands (e.g. ‘ticking the boxes’ to avoid trouble), often suppressing personal ideals in favour of institutional expectations.	Communicative & autonomous reflexivity – There is a mix: teachers often discuss and collectively deliberate on how to respond to mandates (<i>communicative</i>), and many act according to personal or professional values (<i>autonomous</i>), especially when deciding whether or how to engage with certain platform requirements.
Sociomaterial adaptation	Digital displacement of the informal – Physical informal interactions have been almost completely replaced by digital communication (especially during/after lockdowns). The removal of social spaces and pervasive use of monitoring tools means even online spaces feel surveilled. Teachers adapt by finding minimal informal contact (e.g.	Coexistence of digital and physical interactions – The school sustains a blend of online and offline collegial interaction. Even when teaching moved online, staff kept in touch via informal WhatsApp groups or socially distanced meetups. Post-lockdown, communal spaces sprang back to life. Digital tools are used for efficiency but have not eradicated the rich informal support networks.

²⁴ This mode is typically non-deliberative, efficiency-focused and concerned with immediate institutional demands. In this context, it refers to teachers whose internal conversations prioritise compliance and professional survival within a performative regime.

Source: Archer, M.S. (2003) *Structure, agency and the internal conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 223–232.

	quick personal messages) but largely operate under digitally mediated oversight.	
Outcome of interactions	Predominantly morphostasis – Teachers’ daily practices, even under strain, reproduced the existing managerial structures and performative culture (Archer, 2000a). Where change occurred, it involved the extension and intensification of pre-existing managerial CEPs through platform-mediated practices and intensification of pre-existing managerial CEPs, rather than any reorientation of the underlying logic of hierarchical control.	Hybrid – morphostatic pressures with morphogenetic spaces – Managerial demands did persist (e.g. periodic pushes for data), but alongside these, new spaces of teacher autonomy emerged or expanded. Teachers collectively carved out areas of practice free from strict control (<i>morphogenesis</i>), even as other aspects remained tied to old accountability pressures. The result is a more mixed evolution of practices.

Appendix J: Emergent outcomes of platform governance at T₄.

Outcome Dimension	Matson Academy Outcome (Morphostatic)	Larwood School Outcome (Morphogenetic Mixed)
Governance model evolution	Intensified centralisation: The MAT's control over platform use became further entrenched. Post-pandemic reviews led to no loosening of policies; if anything, digital oversight was codified into standard practice.	Persistent fragmentation (with hints of centralisation): The school did not cohere into a unified strategy; different departments continued varied practices. A planned adoption of a new MIS (Arbor) signalled potential future centralisation, but staff scepticism remains a countervailing force.
Teacher agency and compliance	Compliance as the norm: Teachers largely adjusted to the high-surveillance environment. Most staff, even if begrudgingly, came to incorporate the required platform tasks into their routine. Open resistance remained minimal.	Empowered non-compliance normalised: It became an accepted norm that teachers exercise discretion in using platforms. There is broad tolerance for 'opting out' of non-essential digital tasks, and leadership has not re-asserted strict control (partly due to ongoing leadership changes).
Professional culture	Data-driven accountability entrenched: An accountability mindset has sunk in as the 'new normal.' Teachers speak the language of data targets (even if privately sceptical) and have adapted to constant monitoring. Relational trust or professional judgment holds little official sway.	Resilient collegiality with cautious outlook: The professional culture remains collegial and supportive, and morale is decent. However, teachers are wary that new leadership or external pressure (e.g. LA) could suddenly impose stricter systems. They value their current autonomy and have informal norms to protect it (e.g. staff unity in gently resisting onerous initiatives).
Sociomaterial arrangements	Institutionalisation of surveillance spaces: The spatial and digital changes (no staffroom, integrated dashboards, etc.) have been cemented. New teachers join the school and accept the absence of a staffroom as just how it is. The infrastructure of control (CCTV, platform requirements, IT usage tracking) is firmly in place.	Reaffirmation of informal spaces: Communal areas remain in use and important. The staffrooms are once again hubs of daily life. However, some new systems (e.g. a sign-in app, occasional online briefings) have been added, creating a blend of old and new practices. Teachers accommodate these so long as they don't threaten the core collegial culture.
Reflexive feedback to structure (looking ahead)	Morphostasis dominating: The changes wrought by the pandemic were absorbed into existing structures without fundamentally changing them. Digital governance in Matson Academy is now simply a more intensified version of what it was. This outcome feeds back into T ₁ of the next cycle as a reinforcement of the MAT's structural and cultural parameters. Future changes are likely to face the same tightly bounded context.	Mixed, leaning morphogenetic: Larwood School shows a mix of reproduced habits (e.g. ad hoc approaches, uneven tech use) and new dynamics (e.g. teachers feeling empowered to ignore certain edicts, stronger horizontal solidarity). These signal departures from the old norm. The outcome is mixed but contains seeds of potential change driven by the staff. In the next cycle, depending on leadership, these could be built upon or rolled back.

Appendix K: Norm circles, associated norms, enforcement mechanisms and effects on teacher agency

Table K1: Matson Academy

Norm circle	Status	Norms and expectations	Enforcement and endorsement mechanisms	Effects on teacher agency	Overlap and interactions
Senior Leadership Team / Trust Executives	Formal, dominant	Compliance with platform metrics; performativity; uniformity through mandated platforms and data-driven standards	Downward pressure via unannounced learning walks; datafixation and NPM logics; weekly performance summaries; continual departmental ‘health checks’; symbolic messaging in briefings	Narrows agency to monitored conformity; encourages anticipatory compliance; fosters reputational anxiety	Strong downward causation; HoDs and conformist teacher circles amplify SLT norms; resistant circles remain peripheral
ICT Department / Trust IT Manager	Formal technical	Rapid adoption of digital systems; adherence to updated processes; expectation of technical compliance	Mandated processes; helpdesk directives; escalation to SLT for non-compliance; cultural framing of adoption as professionalism	Mixed effects: teachers become dependent on ICT but can (covertly) resist when practices appear managerial rather than supportive	Aligns closely with SLT; tension with resistant circles due to differing priorities (pedagogy vs system logic)
Heads of Department	Formal, intermediary	Departmental alignment with SLT standards; monitoring of data entry; consistent use of Satchel One, Go4Schools and SIMS	Department meetings driven by SLT agenda; peer-to-peer observation via data reports; performance comparisons; localised pressure	Agency constrained to implementing SLT norms; reduced discretion in curriculum planning and pedagogical leadership	Bridge between SLT and teachers; mediates top-down norms but also intensifies surveillance within departments
Conformist teacher circles	Informal, reinforced	Normalised compliance with SLT standards; visible engagement with Satchel One, Go4Schools and SIMS; acceptance of performative routines as the professional baseline	Peer reinforcement within departments; reputational pressures linked to data visibility; tacit comparison with colleagues; frequent alignment with HoD expectations	Agency expressed through conformity; stability gained by adopting dominant norms; reduced space for experimentation, discretion or critical deliberation	Multiple circles embedded in department teams; strong alignment with SLT and HoDs amplifies managerial norms; consolidation strengthened by the loss of whole-school social spaces

Resistant teacher circles (covert)	Informal, marginal	Selective or strategic compliance; avoidance of unnecessary data entry; prioritisation of pedagogical autonomy; scepticism towards performativity	Discontent shared in private conversations; discreet sharing of workarounds; reliance on trusted colleagues; concealment to avoid reputational or disciplinary risk	Micro-resistance sustains limited autonomy, but isolation curtails collective influence; resistance becomes individualised rather than organised	Fragmented due to staffroom closures; circles reduced to small pockets with minimal cross-departmental contact; too dispersed to generate upward causation or visible counter-norms
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Table K2: Larwood School

Norm circle	Status	Norms and expectations	Enforcement and endorsement mechanisms	Effects on teacher agency	Overlap and interactions
Principal / Senior Leadership Team	Formal, unstable	Fluid and shifting platform expectations arising from repeated leadership changes (Google Classroom → ClassCharts → Go4Schools → Arbor)	Sporadic directives with limited monitoring; initiatives frequently stall or reverse following leadership turnover	High discretion; teachers wait for stable guidance before investing time and resources; weak and inconsistent downward causation	Minimal overlap with departmental norms; teacher-led circles routinely bypass SLT expectations
Local Authority (LA) governance	Formal, external	Preservation of legacy systems; adherence to LA procurement rules; emphasis on statutory compliance rather than innovation	Procurement constraints; curriculum oversight; mandatory adherence to LA-approved platforms and processes	Provides structural stability; constrains SLT capacity for rapid change; indirectly supports teacher discretion by limiting managerial experimentation	Constrains SLT decision-making; limited direct interaction with teacher circles
ICT Department / IT Manager	Formal technical	Infrastructure maintenance; responsiveness to staff preferences; attempts to implement shifting leadership priorities	Advisory rather than directive; reactive support; informal encouragement of experimentation with tools that work	High autonomy in digital practice; teachers develop local solutions; ICT lacks authority to impose norms	Limited mediation between SLT and departments; responses shaped more by their own priorities (within LA mandates) than by institutional directives
Subject departments (compliant)	Formal, moderate	Basic adherence to required administrative platforms (registers, behaviour logs, essential tracking); limited	Routine reminders within departments; light coordination	Moderate agency; compliance is pragmatic rather than performative; teachers meet	Overlaps with compliant teacher circles; some alignment with SLT

		engagement with optional digital tools	based on meeting minimal expectations	requirements but do not extend platform use	expectations but weakly enforced
Subject departments (autonomous)	Formal, decentralised	Locally determined digital routines; platform use shaped by pedagogical preferences and historical habits; emphasis on autonomy and self-governance	Collaborative decision-making; peer dialogue; informal agreements about what is useful within each department	Very high agency; departments effectively define their own digital standards; bottom-up decision-making predominates	Strong overlap with resistant teacher circles; departmental autonomy significantly dilutes SLT influence
Compliant teacher circles	Informal, moderate	Basic compliance with essential administrative requirements (registers, behaviour logs); avoidance of unnecessary platform use	Light peer reminders; pragmatic encouragement to meet minimal obligations	Agency expressed through selective minimalism; no pressure toward performativity	Weak alignment with SLT; coexists comfortably with autonomous and resistant circles
Resistant teacher circles	Informal, influential	Preference for trusted tools; collective scepticism toward imposed systems; selective adoption as the accepted norm	Reinforced through open staffroom conversations; open justification for avoidance; collective validation of non-compliance	Strong agency; resistance is legitimate, visible and often normative; teacher-defined standards override managerial attempts at reform	Strong upward causation; extensive overlap with departmental circles; significantly dilutes SLT influence

Appendix L: Theoretical interpretations of platform governance in Matson Academy and Larwood School

Theoretical lens	Matson Academy – MAT (centralised)	Larwood School – LA (decentralised)
Archer – Structural and Cultural Emergent Properties (SEPs & CEPs)	Strong SEP–CEP alignment towards managerial control; centralised governance structure with formalised platform integration ensures platforms’ causal powers are fully actualised for oversight. Structural conditioning at T ₁ predetermines morphostatic reproduction at T ₄ .	Weak structural coupling; heterogeneous CEPs with competing views on autonomy and surveillance. Diffuse governance at T ₁ allows greater T ₂ –T ₃ experimentation, enabling partial structural elaboration (morphogenesis) at T ₄ .
Archer – Structure–Agency interplay	Tight coupling of digital infrastructure to professional responsibilities reduces scope for agential deviation; compliance norms embedded in policy and monitored continuously.	Absence of a unified digital strategy allows teachers’ reflexivity to shape adoption; professional judgment drives platform use, though innovation often remains localised.
Elder-Vass – Norm circles	Dominant, leadership-led norm circle enforces compliance via formal mandate, peer pressure and reputational sanctions. High data visibility amplifies conformity pressures.	Multiple, competing norm circles (departmental, cross-departmental, leadership-led) dilute normative force; spaces for selective engagement and quiet resistance persist.
Foucault – Governmentality and disciplinary power	<i>Panoptic</i> visibility via dashboards, traffic-light indicators and automated alerts normalises standards and responsabilises teachers as self-monitoring subjects. Governance works through internalised compliance.	Governmental rationalities present but less institutionalised; framing of data ownership as empowerment has latent potential to enable future intensification of surveillance (especially with the Arbor MIS).
Platform governance literature	Platformisation fully embedded within governance logic; aligns with NPM performance regimes and competitive benchmarking (Ball, 1998; Williamson, 2017a). Digital architectures materialise policy priorities (Hayes <i>et al.</i> , 2018).	Weakly governed adoption produces ‘institutional drift’ (Decuyper, Grimaldi & Landri, 2021); incoherence reflects ‘precarious reshuffling of corporate and public forces’ (Van Dijck & Poell, 2018). Planned Arbor adoption likely to shift towards a more unified, data-driven model.
Critical realist explanation	Morphostasis – platform governance reproduces existing power structures, amplifying centralised oversight and limiting teacher agency.	Relationally adaptive morphogenesis – diffuse governance enables negotiated practice changes; structural reconfiguration possible if decentralisation persists.

Appendix M: Reflexive modes, norm circles and enabling/constraining factors in Matson Academy and Larwood School

Factor	Matson Academy (MAT)	Larwood School (LA)
Dominant reflexive mode	Communicative reflexives – enacted primarily within compliance-oriented departmental norm circles, reinforcing senior leadership expectations.	Autonomous reflexives – common among experienced staff, with some use of communicative reflexivity in collegial spaces to coordinate selective engagement.
Minority reflexive modes	Autonomous and meta-reflexives present in a smaller, less visible resistant norm circle; critical of platform use and of leadership’s autocratic style.	Meta-reflexives evident among some staff (e.g. after the cyberattack) prompting critical review of data practices; occasional fractured reflexivity in less confident staff.
Norm circles (Elder-Vass)	Dominant norm circles mirror a compliance culture (‘good teacher’ = meeting platform targets without question). A resistant norm circle validates selective non-compliance, discreet workarounds and pedagogical priorities over performative data.	Norm circles vary – some uphold compliance norms, others legitimise selective engagement and professional judgment, expanding the space for teacher discretion.
Enabling/constraining factors	Closure/inaccessibility of communal staff spaces post-pandemic limits cross-departmental deliberation; communicative reflexives largely confined to compliance groups. Strong alignment of SEPs and CEPs towards oversight (stringent data regime).	Preservation of a shared staffroom and informal spaces facilitate open dialogue; weaker coupling between platform use and formal accountability; partial misalignment between SEPs and CEPs creates scope for local adaptation.
Effects on agency	Autonomy narrowed to efficiency gains within compliance parameters; resistant practices remain marginal. Morphostasis predominates through constrained agency (self-disciplined data production).	Greater scope for grassroots negotiation of platform use; some bottom-up change and preservation of diverse teaching strategies. Modest morphogenesis possible, but gains are fragile and contingent on structural context.