

Values-led governance and parental and community engagement in the Co-operative Academies Trust: an alternative in the neoliberal context of education?

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Abstract

This article examines the nature of governance in the Co-operative Academies Trust (CAT) which comprises academy schools in England sponsored by The Co-operative Group. The historical and political context for the study is summarised, the research methodology is explained, and data are drawn upon from one case study academy. Structural, organisational, and operational deviations of the CAT are outlined. The findings illustrate a values-led, branding message and strategic identity, and the placement of senior Co-operative Group employees in the Local Governing Body to ensure the strategic direction is focused upon co-operative values and community. Operationally, the engagement with stakeholders privileges a rational-goal approach, but signs of cultural shift are occurring concurrently with parent forum members demanding deliberation and voice in decision-making.

Keywords

Co-operative Academies Trust, governance, values, deliberation, democratic decision-making, parental voice

Introduction

Before explaining how co-operative schools feature in the contemporary educational landscape, it is necessary first to mention some of the key changes in the English system. Policies over the past four decades have arguably been driven by neoliberal imperatives and led to radical marketisation of the sector (Ball, 2017). Since the 1980s, a succession of initiatives and Acts, instigated by the various different governments in office, have established the conditions for competitive internal or 'quasi-markets' (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1997) and with moves to privatise some aspects of provision. This has brought about structural changes during this period promulgated initially by governments via a mantra of 'choice and diversity' for consumers (i.e. parents), and later on espoused by governments as 'autonomy and freedoms' for schools (Ball, 2017). Deep-seated change has been deemed necessary to raise standards and improve the quality of education provided, particularly for children and young people living in disadvantaged areas (Hall and Raffo, 2008). While the 'free' market has been regarded as the main source of resource distribution on the one hand, on the other such changes were highly structured with indicators to measure performance and with regulation through inspection. A prominent feature of the restructured system includes the transformation of the management and governance of schools through the adoption of managerial practices and New Public Management (NPM) (Newman, 2000). Policy was engineered in such a way to create simultaneous decentralisation and centralisation but with a deliberate weakened role for local authorities and local government (Forrester and Garratt, 2016). Another notable feature of this 'whole system change' (Lupton and Thomson, 2015: 14) is the establishment of different types of schools including trust schools, academies and free schools. This has led to the involvement of some private sponsors and the development of chains of academies, known as Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). Simkins et al. (2019) state the expectations and drive of central government, in relation to governance in MATs, is a centralised governance structure with single or regional governance, as well

as centralised leadership in the form of executive heads and leadership teams. Noticeable as well, are the ways in which schools distinguish themselves in this highly marketised system through badges and branding. According to Courtney (2015:813), branding invokes specific characteristics which ‘may be claimed by or attributed to a school to associate it with others possessing that same status’ and which can be construed as ‘consumer-orientated’ or ‘competitor-oriented’. He purports that branding requires schools to embrace corporate ways of behaviour and, as such, branding is ‘the triumph of neoliberalism as a paradigm for thinking about school type diversity’ (Courtney, 2015: 813). Maguire et al. (2011) however, consider what is ‘not ordinary’, by suggesting that branding, promoting and marketing elevates schools out of the ordinary, which they are compelled to do in order to differentiate themselves in a market-economised world of education. Locatelli (2019) contends the marketisation of education challenges the very notion of education as a public or common good. Restructuring and reform, as outlined above, has thus reconfigured schools and created spaces which others, such as co-operative schools, can inhabit, provide education services, and influence mainstream compulsory education.

The Co-operative Academies Trust

The history of the co-operative movement is complex with diverse international origins and where globally, since the mid-1800s, it has experienced to date growth, demise, renewal and more recently in the United Kingdom (UK), revival (Webster et al., 2012). As such, co-operative values and principles have been developed in many ways over time. The International Co-operative Alliance (2020), which now represents global co-operatives and co-operators provides this statement which defines co-operative as:

an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise. (International Co-operative Alliance, 2020)

The co-operative movement has a long association with education at its heart; Woodin (2012; 2015) offers insight into the evolution of co-operative education in the UK providing information about early schools. In more recent writing, Woodin (2019: 1165) considers that while a specific definition of a co-operative school is elusive, they tend to espouse the following:

equality, equity, democracy, self-help, self-responsibility and solidarity as well as the principles of education, democratic control and community ownership, all of which echo the history of labour movement.

Co-operative Trust schools in the current educational landscape have purported to offer a set of international values and practices, which are democratic, and are a means of ‘ameliorating or challenging capitalist economic or social organisation’ (Facer et al., 2012:332). Facer et al. (2012: 332) further suggest co-operative schools are providing a co-operative tradition to parents, local communities and educators looking for ‘an alternative to the neoliberal marketisation of education’. In terms of governance, all co-operative schools must work with the values of the co-operative movement (Facer et al., 2012). A key feature of co-operative schools, as well as academies, is the belief that schools and academies must respond to the needs of the local context and therefore have

a commitment to the local community and stakeholders. However, there is no blueprint for a co-operative school (Woodin, 2015), but the two types of co-operative education organisations need to be differentiated here. There are Co-operative Trust schools which originally came under the authority of the Co-operative College – a charitable arm of the Co-operative Group, and co-operative academies under the authority of the Co-operative Academies Trust (now a MAT and referred to as the Co-op Academies Trust or the CAT thereon) with direct accountability to the Co-operative Group (referred to as the Co-op Group thereon). The Co-op Group sponsor the academies in the CAT. Much has been written about Co-op Trust schools as these have structured governance formally, because of the commitment to international co-operative values, to enhance democracy in relation to stakeholder groups (Allen, 2018; Wilkins, 2019). Stakeholders from community, staff, pupils and parents are included on the Trust board, in forums and on the governing bodies themselves (Wilkins, 2019; Davidge, 2017). Little has been written about Co-op Academies as organisations, however, and their position as an alternative, although there is a public commitment to working in the most deprived areas in the country (Roberts, 2018) and to linking the regeneration of deprived communities to regeneration of schools in those areas (Roberts, 2019). Davidge et al. (2015: 62) state ‘a school that is co-operative in name but adopts all the hierarchical forms of organisation and practices of mainstream schooling remains incompatible with the vision of co-operation that is the legacy of the early pioneers’. This presents a conflict between alternative, historical values and a neoliberal context of education and is the key focus for this article.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a socially critical perspective and from the outset that the research was undertaken with the wish to challenge the power dynamics within social structures. Furthermore, to change the taken-for-grantedness of the power relations that exist in governance, the role of parents in governance and the type of democracy that is evidenced in this role, challenging the distribution of power and resource (Raffo et al., 2010). A socially critical perspective recognises the voices and lived experiences, or reality, of individuals, families, and communities in relation to education and wider social and economic conditions (Boronski and Hassan, 2015). The most appropriate methodological choice for a socially critical paradigm is a (critical) ethno-case study (Parker-Jenkins, 2016; Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000). The exploration of the Co-op model and how structural, organisational and operational deviations may occur is an instrumental case (Punch, 2014) in that the model of governance and its engagement with parents and community could be perceived as an alternative to the norm in neoliberal contexts of education. By focusing on the power relationship between the CAT Academy and its stakeholders, the case study maintains its criticality. The key research question addressed in this article is:

To what extent is the Co-op Academies Trust model of governance an alternative, in relation to stakeholder engagement?

This research focuses on the Co-op Academies Trust, its governance policy and implementation at a local level in a Co-op Academy located in an area of high deprivation. Documentary analysis was undertaken of CAT documentation: the CAT strategic plan; the CAT governance policy, including the scheme of delegation; the CAT articles of association and funding agreement; as well as the CAT website. This analysis was triangulated with semi-structured interviews, with the Director of the

Trust, the Principal of the Co-op Academy, the Chair of Governors, and with 3 parent governors. One parent governor had been a governor for two years, and one had left being a parent governor as this research began, but nevertheless provided useful insight for this study. A third parent governor was new to the role but had contributions to make as a consistent member of the school's parent forum, as well as insights into governance. Governing body and parent forum meetings were observed using a non-participant observation approach, with event sampling. Following the parent forum, a focus group was conducted with five members of the parent forum. Purposive sampling took place with all interviewees, except for participants in the focus group, where sampling was opportunistic. All interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings. Data were coded and processed using NVivo software. A priori codes were initially identified from both the research questions and from first readings of the data, for example 'branding', 'being Co-op', 'democratic events'. Subsequent emerging codes were identified as a result of more in depth analysis, for example 'decision-making' or community resource'.

Findings and Discussion

Findings suggest there is a plurality of alternative in which governance could be considered. For the purposes of this article the exploration of alternative will be limited to how the Co-op values are 'lived' through the structural, organisational, and operational deviations of the CAT model, in relation to branding and parental and community engagement.

Purpose

From the documents analysed it is evident that the Co-op Group branding is firmly installed into the fabric of the CAT, and their academies. The brand represents and drives international values of co-operation, social enterprise, and community regeneration. The drive for ethical implementation of the brand is evident in the Co-op sponsor's marketing through national television advertising, amongst others. The brand representation is subsequently enshrined in the CAT three year strategic plan and the articles of association and funding agreement (a contract with each academy, the Trust and the National Education Department), which legally binds each academy to implement the Co-op Group's brand message. The articles of association have been amended, unusually so, to ensure each academy's adherence to ICA values and community regeneration. The Trust Director suggests that the CAT difference is the power of the sponsors' ethical values to permeate the academies and focus not just on academy improvement, but also on community optimism and social and economic regeneration. For the CAT community regeneration is as important as school improvement and inextricably linked. The Director of the CAT remarked:

We're doing what matters most, so those values and principles are non-negotiable ... the rationale for it is that, actually, it is about regenerating local communities.

The CAT governance policy documents and schemes of delegation clearly show a commitment from CAT to Local Governing Bodies (LGB). This is in itself unusual in that there has been whole scale decentralisation of governance from central government and a retraction of any expectation of localised governance recentralised to the MAT board (Wilkins, 2017; Young, 2016). Therefore, as a larger than average MAT, the CAT is deviating from the norm with the retention of a LGB. The CAT

LGB model is in line with traditional or maintained school governing body composition, which is the objective the director of the Trust was trying to achieve. When asked in interview if the CAT acted in the role of the traditional Local Authority with a LGB, the Director replied:

Yes that's exactly it...what we have done in this system is try to maintain local presence and a local understanding, councillors can join but actually do you know what, we're going to make sure there is (*sic*) some people in there who have got a sense of what a good school looks like.

What is key in this is twofold; firstly, how a good school is measured within a neoliberal frame. Secondly, the Director, through a previous role, had experience of councillors whom he considered had no knowledge of what good education looked like, and was keen that individuals who did are represented. Furthermore, other representatives are needed who are able to influence in the localised setting with the knowledge and expertise they have for their own arena of responsibility. This is discussed later.

Organisation/Structure

To secure the brand message of Co-op Group and the CAT, the composition of the LGB is key and includes sponsor governors, local councillors, and partners. Whilst the Trust is keen to establish there is no blueprint for a Co-op academy, there is power and expectation, as the Director asserted:

The Co-op have said there is power, this underlying control that they [Co-op Group] have is trying to give that to the schools to interpret that with their children. So there is no model that we have that says you have got to do it in a certain way but there has to be a mechanism, however it is determined, whereby those parents and those staff and the kids feel as though they have got some engagement and can influence .

The role of the sponsor governors is to secure that the values of the Co-op Group, that is the international co-operative values, are enacted through a localised body to meet the needs of the community. In Co-op terms the community is the physical locality that the Academy is situated, not just those who are directly involved in the Academy. They are gatekeepers, a form of 'ensconced' localism. As the Principal of the Co-op Academy stated:

Actually them installing some quite powerful governors ... as well there'll often be a Trust representative at the meetings, so there is some oversight there and there's expectation there and by installing ...influential, articulate, professional governors on the governing body that happens, the Chairs of Governors are Co-op, senior Co-op figures. ...we're hardwired back ... into the Group the tradition, the values, the business, all of that which just keeps us rooted.

Gatekeeping is therefore brand protection and promotion, ensuring each academy becomes the lived reality of Co-op values and principles. The determination of LGB members, specifically Co-op members as professionalised, skilled stakeholders for the Co-op Group, to the LGB is a form of monopoly (Wilkins, 2019), producing in the localised arena a direct accountability up to those in the CAT and Co-op Group. Furthermore, this is also an example of what Wilkins (2019) calls 'epistocracy'; rule by the knowledgeable, in this case knowledge of the Co-op brand, principles and values. In the

case study Co-op Academy, the Chair of Governors was a very senior manager in the Co-op Group along with three sponsored members on the governing body who are also employed by the Co-op Group. They were there to ensure that a Co-op discourse was disseminated, a localised blueprint produced, and in line with Co-op brand expectations. What is alternative is the values and principles themselves. This ensconced localism is a form of governmentality, and Rayner (2018) would argue a form of contextualised governmentality in that the discourse is localised and accepted by those on the LGB. They contextualise the discourse of being Co-op, whilst determining the co-operative direction that the Co-op Academy takes.

Local councillors and co-opted governors, or social partners, have their role to play also as members of the LBG representing further inclusivity and localisation, in that this widens and deepens responsibility for the school and its community and the regeneration of both. By being inclusive, broadening the governance to partners and Local Authority councillors, it secures greater power and influence to draw upon to secure resources from a greater pool to drive community regeneration and school improvement, as well as including individuals who have been democratically elected from within the local community. One example of this at the Co-op Academy is the redevelopment of a redundant site in the community. The Academy took the lead, in association with the local authority and housing association groups, and transformed the site into a hub for the community to develop skills, secure jobs, enabling the community to access resources locally, which would in principle secure more reliable, stable tenants and would potentially have a knock-on effect with regards to the Academy's success. Thus, the CAT strategic identity, when considered as part of a typology of alternative (Woods, 2015) would suggest that the CAT model of brand enactment through a LGB, is assimilation; an alternative which is distinct but part of the mainstream. What differentiates this from 'not ordinary' (Maguire et al., 2011) is the extent to which this is a lived reality.

Operational

Although the findings indicate the structure of the governing body was not wildly different from other maintained models of governance, there were distinct role objectives and with structural and organisational nods towards 'democratic' localism (Hodgson and Spours, 2012)(see Table 1): visioning days relating to school improvement plans, extensive parental and community surveys and parent and community forums. Deliberation, however, is central to any democracy; it gives voice and responds to localisation. The more inclusive, authentic, and consequential the deliberation is, the more democratic the process and polity is (Hetherington, 2020). The functioning heart of this LGB, however, lies with a rational-goal mode of operation (Newman, 2001) and laissez-faire style of governance (Hodgson and Spours, 2012), entrenched in NPM technologies. This approach is not aligned with democratic localism. There are embryonic shifts in cultural thinking though which will only have impact if the integrative norms of operation are also shifted, with a new Chair of Governors utilising the parent survey as part of a visioning day. By shifting the parent survey from a consumer satisfaction survey, albeit as a further source of evidence, it becomes a strategic baseline for community engagement development. Thus, becoming part of a deliberative interconnection (Erman, 2012) between the empowered space and the public space by influencing decision-making, with the potential to increase democracy in the system (Dryzek, 2017; Hendricks, 2009).

The Academy perceives parents are engaged in three ways. Firstly, they are engaged as parent governors, that is stakeholder representation. The parent governors are white, professional women

aged between 40 and 50 years old. The second engagement strategy is through regular parent forum meetings, held half termly, with a core of regular attenders. Finally, through use of an online survey undertaken annually. Parent governors perceive their role as representing the parent body and parental perspectives on the LBG. They understand their role to be strategic and that their contributions are valued equally amongst other LGB members. They feel empowered as decision-makers and consider strongly that they are not 'rubber stamping' decisions (Young, 2017), but recognise the influence and the skill of the Chair to get what she wants done. The parent governors feel strongly that the role of the parent forum is not decision-making but operational consultation, which is evidenced. The parent forum members are not consulted on policy matters and the strategic direction set as a result of the LGB visioning days are not even shared with them. They are 'allowed to offer requests for information to be discussed at the parent forum' (Principal) and have the opportunity to share information or to make suggestions which pertain to operational activities. However, the members of the parent forum, whilst on the one hand state they are listened to, which they are on operational matters, but on the other hand want to be part of a more flexible decision-making system on policy matters which are important to them. The rational goal/NPM style of functioning precludes these parents from engaging in decision-making and privileges a response to their concerns via private discussion and feedback. They are not part of contribution to any decision-making directly or indirectly. This has led to some parents taking up a small but passionate petition, which was dismissed by the Principal. However, as Lingard and Hursh (2019) suggest, parents or stakeholders may well resort to protest and activism if their vote or voice are not listened too. Yet activism in the form a protest is still made through voice (Erman, 2012). There is a keenness to deliberate policy as one parent forum member expressed:

There is a lot of things that need to be done because, you know, we need to kind of sit together and talk to the school and see whether they can come to a negotiation.

Table 1 presents the culmination of the study's findings comparative to existing ideas and literature. The positionality of the CAT is represented in relation to structural, organisational, and operational deviation versus neoliberal models and democratic localism models of governance. The deviations and directions in which the CAT nods towards are indicated by arrows.

PLACE TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Conclusion

The consideration of CAT as an *alternative* offered a plurality of opportunity in relation to community and parental engagement. What has been found is that there are elements of policy and practice which could be considered alternative; however, the integrative norms of operational practice would suggest not an alternative, with a caveat. The Co-op Group branding, values and CAT implementation of policy relating to co-operative values and community regeneration by the individual Co-op Academies represent an alternative. This, it can be argued, secures the lived reality of common goods outcomes (Locatelli, 2019) for the community, rather than 'not ordinary' (Maguire et al., 2011).

Holloway and Keddie (2020) suggest this represents a localised effect of the neoliberal opportunity of diversification, as opposed to challenging the system. They suggest individual schools and leadership can impact upon social justice imperatives if ethical and social justice directions are taken by the individual to act upon the local. In this case social justice imperatives are driven from the MAT rather than the individual academy leadership. In terms of structural and organisational deviation, the retention of a LGB with stakeholders, which also includes social partners and democratically elected community representatives, represents a deviation. As Simkins et al. (2019) suggest, most MATs are shifting their governance away from the local and recreating centralisation at MAT headquarters, without or with limited offer of democracy or stakeholder representation or participation. There is a CAT expectation of localised policy and enactment of Co-op principles and legally binding direction in the form of community regeneration activities. Therefore, there are bounded freedoms and expectations for the Co-op Academy LGB to utilise, based on localised need. These are structural and organisational nods to democratic localism, an ensconced localism. However, what is not present is a commitment to the operational aspects of democratic localism, which would have then provided a wholesale alternative to neoliberal governance. The current integrative norms are based on a culture of rational goal (Newman, 2001) and NPM practices. While parent governors feel wholeheartedly that they are equal partners in the decision-making processes, they recognise neoliberal leadership techniques which gives the illusion of democratic practices in the empowered space. Wider parent and community stakeholders are at best involved (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Auerbach, 2012) rather than engaged, as power is never with the stakeholder and decisions are always removed. However, the caveat, there are embryonic shifts and a growing awareness, by the Chair of Governors, to shift to more parental and community engagement. With the movement from the top towards more inclusive strategic visioning and development planning by the LGB and a movement for more deliberative decision-making from wider stakeholder groups from the bottom, there is a view that progress towards the middle would produce a more democratic localised polity, giving all stakeholders a legitimate voice and an authentic space to be heard. In other words, there is the potential for a deliberative democratic system to be established under the umbrella of democratic localism.

Declaration of conflicting interests

There are no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Table 1. The positionality of the CAT in relation to structural, organisational and operational deviation versus neoliberal models and democratic localism models of governance. Arrows signal the deviations and direction in which the CAT leans

	Neoliberalism (Simkins et al, 2019)	CAT	Democratic Localism (Hodgson and Spours, 2012)
Purpose	Maximisation of output, economic rationalism (Newman, 2001)	ICA values, community regeneration, school improvement	Public and common good (Locatelli, 2020), self- governance, democratic enactment of shared core values, emphasis on self-government and consensual decision-making (Bryk et al., 1998)
Structural	Professionalised – skills-based governance, two parent representatives on centralised governing body. Exclusive representation	Professionalised, skills-based stakeholder representation, (with skill privileged over stake) but diverse and inclusive role representation, representation based on stake-field expertise	Local stakeholder and social partner collaboration, stakeholder model, majority parent and community membership (Bryk et al., 1998)
Organisational	Centralised governance, executive leadership,	LGB; full governing body, delegation to subcommittee, planned strategic events, ‘ensconced’ localism	Mutual accountability between different layers of governance and social partners through the use of ‘policy frameworks’ to create a strongly collaborative local system
Operational	Hierarchical/ rational goal model - NPM (Newman, 2001) emphasis on structures, roles, procedures, output, and meeting targets, KPIs	Hierarchical/ rational goal model - NPM (Newman, 2001) emphasis on structures roles, procedures output and meeting targets, KPI’s	Self-governance/ open systems model (Newman, 2001) fostering democratic participation and empowerment of stakeholders, building consensus, embedding networks, flexible responsive forms of participation
Parental and community involvement/engagement	If any stakeholder involvement - NPM; consumer satisfaction survey, one-way information flow	Parental involvement M; consumer satisfaction survey, two-way operational information flow (parent forum)	Stakeholder and social partners engaged in democratic deliberation and authentic decision-making

