

Brand Advantage, Risk Mitigation, and the Illusion of Democracy: Approaches to School Governance

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Abstract

This research explores the relationship between Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) brand objectives, brand advantage and subsequent risk mitigation strategies utilised to position MATs in England in a notional hierarchy. This is exemplified through empirical case-study research: the Co-operative Academies Trust model of school governance; the roles and practices established for participants in decision-making within it, as well as its stated commitment to democracy. Brand objectives, the hive organisation and the reimagined roles of those members of the Local Governing Body, as well as the illusion of democracy, reveal that accountability is cemented upward. Subsequently, parents and community members are secondary to the need to be perceived by the Regional Director and associated power structures as high-status in a hierarchicalised system of MATs. Thus, mitigating risk by control and power of 'trusted' individuals and practises which are deemed trustworthy by those who are determining the amenability of scrutiny. A conceptual framework was developed from the analysis of data and this exposes the complex interplay between three competing citizenries namely corporate, democratic and consumer citizenship all of which co-exist interdependently in relation to the notion of trust.

Introduction

The research project reported in this paper investigated the relationship between Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) brand objectives, brand advantage and subsequent risk mitigation strategies in England, which Simon et al. (2021) suggest position MATs in a notional hierarchy. Specifically, the project centred on the Co-operative Academies Trust (CAT) model of school governance. The CAT is sponsored by and directly accountable to The Co-op Group and CAT academies operate with co-operative values and democratic principles underpinning the governance model. Democracy is a significant feature of the values and principles of a co-operative enterprise and is one of five other values identified by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) which underpin all organisations calling themselves co-operatives (ICA, 2020). The research explored how one CAT Academy engaged with stakeholders, particularly parents and community groups in an area of deprivation, to secure authentic decision-making partnerships based on ICA values, specifically democracy. As such, given its association with the Co-op Group brand, the CAT makes for a significant case to investigate in the marketised context of education in England. The notion of brand, risk mitigation and democracy were investigated in relation to school governance using the instrumental case of the CAT. What transpired from our analysis are three potential citizenry positionings for those agents involved in school governance. The conceptual framework presented exposes the complex interplay between three competing citizenries namely corporate, democratic and consumer all of which co-exist interdependently in relation to the notion of trust. This is exemplified through empirical research of the Co-operative Academies Trust (CAT) model of school governance. What follows outlines the policy context for the paper and consideration of literature relating to risk, democracy, and brand in relation to school governance.

Literature review

The policy context in England

Neoliberal imperatives have arguably driven education policies in England over the past four decades, leading to the depoliticisation (Flinders and Woods, 2015) and radical marketisation of the sector (Ball, 2021). The creation of an education marketplace through various legislation was devised purposely to fuel competition between providers while consumers are encouraged to make choices. However, what has been created are what Bartlett (1993) refers to as internal ‘quasi’ markets which are essentially managed rather than being considered free in the true sense of a market. Widespread structural changes and expansion of provision have followed with moves towards privatisation initially in the guise of raising educational standards through the mechanisms of ‘choice and diversity’ for consumers (parents), and later via ‘autonomy and freedoms’ for schools (Ball, 2021). Successive governments have proactively adopted dominant private sector methods and practices transforming the operations in the education system to become more like-businesses; a process coined by Ball and Youdell (2007:13) as ‘endogenous privatisation’. As such, the utilisation of ‘brand’ in the business-like, competitive education marketplace, for example, is symbolic in terms of its potential to differentiate schools and establish a credible ‘brand image’. Brand has arguably become a distinguishing indicator which establishes positionality. According to Keller and Lehmann (2006: 740) “brand positioning involves establishing key brand associations in the minds of customers and other important constituents to differentiate the brand and establish (to the extent possible) competitive superiority.” Branding, thus, positions the organisation advantageously in the field. Significantly, Simon et al. (2021) have postulated brand advantage, or positioning, in the edu-business world is crucial, securing status in what they deem as a hierarchical system of MATs. The more prestigious brands are privileged or positioned in the high-stakes play of school acquisition and are thus privileged in the edu-market, promoting their brand to potential consumers or clients. Subsequently, risk mitigation strategies are needed to maintain and gain brand market advantage, but also brand protection in the performative, marketised and choice-focused context of education: market accountability (Courtney et al., 2018). Conflating neoliberalism as state-form (Springer, 2012), whereby the state abdicates responsibility and risk for reconfigured public services, with policy reform has engineered simultaneous (de)centralisation, with a deliberately weakened role for local authorities (LA) and local government (Forrester and Garratt, 2016). This disintermediation (Lubienski, 2014), where power and influence are withdrawn from the traditional meso-layer of education, has responsibilised a *new* private middle tier for the risk and responsibility of the sector, as well as for its own brand. This has facilitated an extension of central control in new spaces, removed from local government influence and controlled at a distance, through the activity of ‘new intermediary actors and organisations’ in the guise of MAT trustees and Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) (Wilkins and Gobby, 2022).

Risk regulation and the democratic deficit

A growing distrust in the functioning of public services such as education, combined with governments driven to achieve political and economic goals, determines the need for governments to perceive and manage risk to their brand. Distrust is not the absence of trust, but the expectation that individuals cannot be relied upon to not cause harm (Baxter, 2021). Trust is related to risk regulation; it exposes a vulnerability related to reputation and brand. This risk is mitigated through hard regulation, which limits and determines local activity (Greany and Higham, 2018) producing a rationality and a

framework of government to construct and perfect control and intervention (Wilkins and Gobby, 2022), from government and other regulators or government proxies. Thus, responsabilisation is further entrenched, Springer (2012) suggests, by neoliberalism as governmentality, which reflects the self-regulation of those new intermediary actors and organisations who are now responsabilised for managing risk in-line with the enactment of government will and subject to hard regulation. The resultant hegemony of managerialism and New Public Management (NPM), and corporatisation, which has removed decision-making from representative institutions to corporately controlled entities (Gunter 2018), have transformed the management and governance practices of schools (Newman, 2001). The professionalisation of governance, a neoliberal political rationality and a new middle tier have signified a democratic deficit raising questions over stakeholder representation (Connolly et al., 2017) and the accountability of school governance, to be responsive to community and parental needs (Woods and Simkins, 2014). The high trust that the professionalised parent governors now have associated with risk mitigation, relates to the perceived level of collaborative advantage (Huxham and Vangen, 2005) that professionalised governors will bring to the Local Governing Body (LGB). Furthermore, Reay (2017) suggests, professionalising school governance via a business-model approach galvanises exclusionary processes by privileging those who are white and middle-class as the subjects of value.

Brand advantage

The ways in which schools distinguish themselves in this marketised system are notable through badges and branding. To distinguish schools and academies Courtney (2015) offers a differentiating typology, particularly through the lenses of locus of legitimation and branding. Whereby legitimation is considered the source of authority which secures a school or academy as one of its type that enables it to determine or determine for it, its identity (Courtney, 2015). Corporate legitimation is sourced through the business or philanthropic organisation that runs the school and has been borne out of the neoliberal policy of the essential inclusion of businesses and charitable organisation involvement in education. Complimentary to legitimation is branding; as Courtney (2015) states, branding is the set of characteristics that the school or organisation claim to identify as unique, 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). Conjointly with branding is the consideration of what is 'not ordinary' (Maguire et al., 2011: 1) in that schools are compelled to promote and market their brand and to utilise fabrications to elevate themselves out of the ordinary, in an economised edu-market. This branding is key to securing a brand advantage in a 'branded' education system that marketises and commodifies pedagogical beliefs and values (Simon, 2017). Thus, through various legislation, mainstream compulsory education has been reconfigured with spaces created for others, such as co-operative schools, to inhabit and provide education services.

Methodology

The exploration of the CAT model of governance, and the engagement and role of parents and others as stakeholders as decision-makers, or agents of consequence, within a Co-operative Academy in an area of high deprivation in England, is an instrumental case (Stake, 2000). The University's ethical

principles and the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) were adhered to; ethical approval was granted for the study. Ethnographic/case study methods were employed (Parker-Jenkins, 2016), involving non-participant observations, interviews, and documentary analysis. One secondary academy, referred to as City Academy (a pseudonym) is located in a community of high deprivation and diverse ethnicity, and was the site identified for the investigation ([ANON], 2021). Various CAT documentation was analysed (Atkinson and Coffey, 2011), specifically; the CAT website, strategic plan, governance policy, including the scheme of delegation, the Articles of Association and funding agreement and was triangulated through semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2012). These were conducted with the Director of the Trust, the Principal of the Co-op Academy, the Chair of Governors, and three parent governors (two pseudonyms are used in this paper). A focus group was conducted with five members of the parent forum. All interviewees were purposively sampled (Bryman, 2012), except where sampling was opportunistic for focus group participants. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and data coded and processed using NVivo software (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019).

Findings and discussion

What follows is an exploration of the interrelationship between brand objectives, the associated risk relating to the brand, and the risk mitigation strategies employed to secure brand advantage. The exemplified strategies are ensconced localism, trust and NPM or managerialism.

What is the brand objective and advantage?

The Co-op Group brands itself heavily on its co-operative values, as do the academies it sponsors. The Co-op 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 media, for example, 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; CAT, 2018). The Director of the CAT said:

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

It is evident from this exemplification that the Co-op Group brand objective, is firmly installed into the fabric of the CAT and its academies. The brand representation is enshrined in the CAT's three-year strategic plan and the Articles of Association and funding agreement (CAT, 2021) which legally bind each academy to implement the Co-op Group's brand message. The Department for Education's model contract outlining the Articles of Association has been amended specifically to ensure all CAT academies adhere to Co-op Group brand objectives.

This is significant, in that the legal contracts of the Articles of Association and funding agreement clearly outline how the CAT will operate and, subsequently, how the CAT academies must operate, therefore linking values and principles to funding rather than a specific policy or blueprint for each academy. This unusual amendment of the Articles of Association indicates the high-stakes (Baxter, 2021; Simon et al., 2021) level of commitment the Co-op Group and CAT have to the brand, the

implementation of co-operative values, including democracy, and community regeneration. This is underlined by the Director who, when talking about the CAT difference, stated:

Power sits within the board, but it ... permeates through all of these people ... that is how we regenerate communities... if it was just about school improvement, getting the school to 'good' which is what the DNA of many Trusts is, then actually the Co-op wouldn't be in it.

The Trust Director suggests that the CAT difference is the power of the Co-op Group's brand to permeate the academies, focusing not just on academy improvement, but also community optimism and social and economic regeneration. This could be perceived as the Co-op group's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), or corporate citizenship (Rendtorff, 2020), strategy. Johnson et al. (2017) define CSR as "the commitment by organisations to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as the local community and society at large." The more well-developed an organisation's CSR or corporate citizenship strategy, the greater it exceeds its minimum legal obligations and the greater its competitive (brand) advantage (Marsden and Andriof, 1998).

A further high-stakes investment in the brand is the organisation's physical representation in its buildings and location, and also in the embodiment of brand signifiers represented on every inside structure. The headquarters of the Co-op Group and all components of its business including the CAT, based at Angel Square, Manchester, is cutting-edge, iconic and symbolic, both inside and out. The building, it seems, symbolises a New Right statement of tradition and authority, the modern rooted in its history, conflated with entrepreneurialism and market-logic principles, yet a beacon of co-operativism with a national reach. Located close to the original Victorian Rochdale Pioneers building, the headquarters is a physical and metaphorical shift to its location in the economic and influential base of the Northern Powerhouse; from a bottom-up co-operative to a multi-million-pound organisation - a shining example of capitalism in co-operative clothing. From this hive imagery of co-operativism, employees are released to develop local versions of the Co-op Group co-operativism, such as local governance, as outlined by the Principal of City Academy:

It's to do with Co-op values [by] installing some quite powerful governors there and they clerk meetings as well and there'll often be a Trust representative at the meetings, so there is some oversight and there's an 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...that's always been the case here so we're hardwired back ... into the Group the tradition, the values, the business, all of that which just keeps us rooted, ..., there.

Reciprocally, those participants in the Co-op Group interests, such as parent governors, are brought into Angel Square to secure, arguably, their commitment to Co-op Group values and ideals, which are embodied visually and symbolically on every wall of the building and at every turn in the organisation. A further significance of the CAT's location in Angel Square is, arguably, the Co-op Group's metaphorical arm around the edu-business, to stand behind it with its powerful brand expectations and to survey its progress at close quarters, whilst inculcating the brand message. This is much like the iconic and symbolic building of the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) (Gunter and Forrester, 2009). The NCSL building was designed, Gunter and Forrester (2009) postulate, to house a

physical and symbolic representation of New Labour's ambitions for school leadership and demonstrated modernity and a shift away from the old order by presenting a state-of-the-art investment for those who worked or were invited there. The iconic and symbolic nature of both buildings, arguably, advertise the power and ambition within, the brand advantage, and the specialness by which those who work within are considered. Reputational brand failure would be catastrophic with such a public pronouncement of power and success it would seem.

What is at risk?

What the CAT is trying to achieve is riddled with complexity, vulnerability, and of a high-stakes nature. Both the reputation of the sponsor, its association with the CAT, and the success of the CAT academies and the reputation of the CAT itself are subject to risk. The risks relate to the ambitious CAT plan to increase its acquisition of schools in areas of deprivation to 40 by 2022 (Roberts, 2018; CAT, 2018) (which was not achieved), and parent and community members perception of the ethical and co-operative values of the Co-op Group with CAT and its academies. Furthermore, risk is related to the Co-op Group brand itself, which has had significant brand reputational failures in the past, due to its unethical banking practices (Mangan and Byrne, 2018). This ambitious acquisition plan would elevate the CAT as a significant player amongst MATs and recognition by the Regional Director (RD), formally the Regional Schools Commissioner, who takes decisions on the creation, consolidation and growth of MATs. Therefore, brand maintenance and advantage need to be privileged to secure this positioning: to realise a strategic identity beyond 'not ordinary.' Parents as consumers or clients of the academy are, arguably, secondary to the failure or success of the brand, relative to the RD, who is key in the merger, acquisition, and takeover of academies by MATs (Greany and Higham, 2018) that CAT is intent on. The relationship between the RD and MATs, that MATs are reliant on, is varied and dependent on and reflects the status, hierarchies, and inequalities inherent in a performance and outcomes-focused system (Simon et al., 2021). The strength of the brand and its stated commitments are vulnerable to significant risk, as Wilkins (2019a:101) concurs, with "unregulated market and moral hazards", which need to be mitigated to maintain not only brand market advantage but brand protection. Academies and MATs therefore cannot afford to be considered anything other than 'not ordinary' (Maguire et al., 2011) in the marketised context of education.

How has risk to brand identity been mitigated?

What follows is a discussion of the strategies utilised by CAT to secure brand advantage and mitigate risk. The CAT has structured and organised its governance of academies purposefully by retaining an LGB and by utilising an 'ensconced' form of localism (Hetherington and Forrester, 2022), with embedded 'knowledge actors' (Gunter and Mills, 2017). Furthermore, it has rejected a democratic approach to operationalising school governance whilst excelling at NPM, utilising technologies of rational self-management, reducing the risk of derailment by stakeholders. Both ensconced localism and its reimagined roles, and NPM, are 'trusted' (Baxter, 2021) and therefore represent a neoliberal normalised order of reason (Lingard and Hursh, 2019) which privileges upward accountability to Trust board and RDs, over the 'local', and democratic practices.

1. *The role of ensconced localism*

The CAT has committed to retain an LGB with significant powers of delegation, indicating its apparent 'trust' in the 'local' to implement its objectives. Organisationally, MAT governance is notionally a

nested model of governance (Baxter, 2021), the degree to which power is delegated from the apex is dependent upon the trust and the circumstances of the academy. The CAT LGB commitment is contrary to MAT-centralised government constructs of school governance (Wilkins, 2017; Baxter, 2021; Simkins et al., 2019) and in opposition to what Greany and Higham (2018) report as good practice from a government and RD perspective. Furthermore, they suggest as MATs increase in size, layers of bureaucracy increase, individual schools have reduced autonomy, and practice a hierarchical model without a local mandate. As Wilkins (2022) underlines, the commitment from the CAT in localising power and leadership within LGBs deviates from the norm, and therefore, it is at least 'not ordinary' for a larger, and more ambitious MAT (Roberts, 2018), but constitutes a risk which needs some form of mitigation.

This form of LGB organisation represents a form of localism: governance that is located away from direct central functioning. The CAT model of localism, as referenced by the Director of the CAT, relates to both brand objectives and power:

the Co-op has said there is power, this underlying control that they 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 [co-operative values] in a certain way", there is no model that says "you have got to have a parent forum, you have got to have a staff forum", 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, for example.

To afford each LGB an appearance of localism, the LGB has highly choreographed roles to mitigate the risk relating to localism. Each governor's role is predicated on the 'expert local', which is manifested in a form of ensconced localism (Hetherington and Forrester, 2022). There are three roles reimagined to mitigate the risk to brand objectives and brand advantage, or risk managers, these are the Co-op Group governors, the co-opted governors, and the parent governors. Wilkins and Gobby (2022) propose these are new authorities or 'knowledge actors' (Gunter and Mills, 2017:2) which are celebrated and normalised through government frameworks of risk mitigation.

The Co-op Group governors are senior Co-op Group employees who leave 'the hive' and are released across the Trust, ensconced in LGBs to steer governing bodies and academies to adhere to the principles of the Articles of Association/funding agreements, which are specifically related to being Co-op. This is central power filtering through gatekeepers and knowledge providers, steering each academy to utilise this power to localise to the needs of the community through the lens, values, and principles of Co-op, to ensure that a Co-op discourse is disseminated, a localised blueprint produced, aligned with Co-op brand expectations and its corporate citizenship strategy. It is therefore brand protection and promotion, ensuring that each academy becomes the lived-reality of Co-op values and principles. This is a form of governmentality. They contextualise the discourse of being Co-op, whilst determining the co-operative direction that each academy takes.

Epistocracy and monopoly (Wilkins, 2019b) are evident in the professional, skills-based parent governors at City Academy. Parent governors at City Academy are all white, highly skilled professionals, having worked in finance, business management, or educational arenas. They are not representative of the academy community which is low socio-economically and ethnically diverse..

This is in line with the drive for the professionalisation of governing bodies (Connelly et al., 2017) and government expectations of 'good governance' (Wilkins, 2019a). This is further found in Rogers et al.'s (2012) findings that white, professional and higher socio-economic individuals are much more likely to engage in activities such as governance than lower socio-economic individuals or from an ethnic minority, being raced and classed (Kultz, 2021; Reay et al., 2007). This is underlined by the corporatised parent governors who stated:

he [the Principal] just pointed out, "look this role is available". I knew about it via the normal channels, ... "just to make you aware this role is available" and sort of like gave me a bit of confidence, ... "would you consider it, would you consider it?" Not asking me to apply, there was no pressure but, "would you consider it?" (Hetty, Parent Governor, Finance background)

And further underlined by the Principal:

Louise, one of our parent governors led a whole section [of the visioning day] with the rest of the governing body, so you can't say that they're there just to fill a seat because ... she pulled on her ... HR and ... her psychology background.

And in contrast, the statement the Principal made regarding parents in the forum, not parent governors:

when we have a parents' forum, we have to properly contract that meeting, 'cos I'm not dealing with a room full of parent governors who are skilled professional people who understand how meetings work. I could be dealing with a room full of anyone, and we have.

Furthermore, the combination of engagement and managing the complexities of decision-making (James et al., 2011), such as performativity regimes, inspection, data analysis and the requirements of financial acuity (Wilkins, 2019a), in the form of corporate accountability (Courtney et al., 2018), ensure that some parents are constructed and positioned to find it difficult to carry out the role (James et al., 2011). In this case, the LGB privilege, pursue and limit opportunity and participation to those parents with professionalised skills over those who do not demonstrate those skills. To limit participation, Wilkins (2019a) suggests, is one technology of rational self-management. Therefore, these professionalised parents are functioning as part of the corporate citizenry and those not, are positioned as part of the consumer citizenry.

2. The role of trust

The LGB place high-value trust in the capacity of those with professionalised skills, and actively *distrusts* those parents without, as illustrated in the Principal's quote above, securing school parent governors who are efficient actors in actualising technologies of rational self-management (Wilkins, 2019a). Subsequently, the perfection of these technologies mitigate the risk of underperformance and enable the Academy to excel at combining the interests of government and sponsor, strengthening accountability, and the relations between schools and central government through positive brand advantage and marketisation (Wilkins, 2016; 2019a). Ultimately, this privileging of skill and professional attributes over stake is a direct result of government policy, which valorises and privileges the relationship upwards between the Academy, sponsors, and government, as well as

positive external judgements, motivated by brand reputational advantage in the market, of being ‘not ordinary’ (Maguire et al., 2011), over the local and stake.

Co-opted governors are social partners securing the social regeneration brand objectives with CAT. They act as local boundary spanners (Ball and Junemann, 2012; Baxter, 2021), professional stakeholders, who utilise their expertise to mobilise and maximise capital: human, social and economic for use within the Academy. They act here as brokers and bridges, managing collaborations with others, and facilitating, as Ball and Junemann (2012) suggest, the flow of leading-edge information between their arena, the community, and the governing body (Baxter, 2021) because they speak a different ‘sectorial language’ (Ball and Junemann, 2012:90), as well as connecting problems to solutions, such as the ‘how’ of community regeneration. They are risk managers. As the Principal outlines here, when discussing the ‘how’ of adhering to the Articles of Association:

we talk about the communities that we serve regardless of if we have a charter that comes to us ... which is a challenge, the hub building down the road that’s an example of where we sought out a partnership with one of our local housing associations ... they are part of a social regeneration wing to what they do ... and we worked with them through one of our governors.

One of the purposes the CAT Director suggested for the maintenance of an LGB concerned regeneration of communities, which is a primary objective of the CAT and Co-op Group:

It is about regenerating those communities, so if there is a local governor who wants to... come on the governing body he can, or she can.

This inclusivity and localisation in the retention of an LGB localises, widens and deepens responsibility for the school and its community and the regeneration of both. By reimagining roles, being inclusive, and broadening the governance to traditional constituent members, such as partners and LA councillors, it arguably secures greater power and influence to draw upon to secure resources from a greater pool. Greany (2022) advocates the deeper facilitation of the LA beyond the role of a boundary spanner so they can bind diverse stakeholders together to work towards realising a place-based vision. Being an expert in their arena affords those partners power and additional reach to secure the objectives outlined by the CAT and Co-op Group for community regeneration, corporate citizenship, and Academy improvement. Representatives, as boundary spanners, are utilised to influence in the localised setting and in some cases have been democratically elected by their community. Arguably for the Co-op Group and the CAT, and as stated by the Director above, the regeneration of communities is as important a brand objective as school improvement. Therefore, the inclusion of local councillors and co-opted governors, or social partners – the boundary spanners – for the Director and the Principal is crucial in representing further inclusivity and localisation, serving the wider political, economic and corporate citizenship interests of the sponsor. Arguably, the local boundary spanners as members of the LGB, can work with other governors to drive and utilise their economic and social capital to gain unique access to resources that would be otherwise unavailable to the LGB or the CAT. Furthermore, as boundary spanners, they are extended high levels of trust (Baxter, 2021), in that they have *not* been limited in terms of participation but selected for the purpose of their capital. As trust exposes vulnerability and risks to the organisational goals; trust is not extended lightly, the stakes are too high (Baxter, 2021).

3. *The role of managerialism or NPM*

A further risk mitigation strategy, framed with an understanding of trust and distrust, is how enconced localism (Hetherington and Forrester, 2022) is enacted and how governance is operationalised through the CAT. Arguably, if a cornerstone of co-operativism is democracy and the CAT has embedded the values of co-operativism into the legally binding Articles of Association, it would be expected that democracy, and notions of democratic citizenship (Kallhof, 2013), would be a key facet of how the LGB operated. However, when considering how governance is operationalised at City Academy and the CAT, what is clear is that parent and community participation exist as realities of hierarchical and rational goal modes of governance (Newman, 2001) and is positioned in the consumer citizenry (Clarke et al., 2007). There is some evidence of representative democracy in relation to parent governors, and a democratic illusion exists – for example, a vote for the role of parent representative governor – as is expected and associated with hierarchical forms of governance (Newman, 2001). The dominant form of operationalism in this governing body is a rational-goal mode (Newman, 2001), or what Wilkins (2019a) would call rational self-management practices of NPM. What this means for participation in the rational-goal mode, is the parent, as a client (Lingard and Hursh, 2019), or consumer citizen, is expected to feedback on aspects of school performance, “what are we doing well/not so well?”, “even better if...”, this is evidenced in the annual parent survey that the City Academy and the whole of the CAT undertake. As consumers, parents receive feedback, “you said, we did” to maintain, if not consumer satisfaction, an illusion of partnership, participation, and to market brand advantage. This positioning of parents in the consumer citizenry by CAT is limiting, not only in the extent of agency granted in an already limited role (Clarke et al., 2007), but also in relation to democracy and public participation (or notions of democratic citizenship). As evidenced in the findings, rational-goal modes denote a “managerial framing of participation with limited delegation of power, diversity of consumer preferences acknowledged with an emphasis on funder and government requirements” (Newman, 2001: 140), rather than responsive forms of participation as in the open-systems mode, delegation of powers to self-managing organisations, and counter-publics as in the self-governing mode. Furthermore, Clarke et al. (2007) cite, even within the consumer citizenry, examples of more participatory forms of consultation on public services, such as citizen juries or other such democratic micro-innovations, which find themselves more at home in the democratic citizenry. This is evidence of a neoliberal political rationality (Wilkins, 2016) that normalises NPM and rational-goal behaviours. For the CAT and City Academy, employing NPM technologies as part of corporate citizenship strategies to achieve their goals limits the extent of democratic practice and citizenship (Newman, 2001; Wilkins, 2019a), as is evidenced in relation to participation in decision-making and the realisation of democratic values. Realising democracy in relation to decision-making, however, would mean delegation and redistribution of power and control from the CAT LGB and from the corporate Co-op centre to the stakeholder and risks the derailment of brand objectives and potential brand failure if stakeholder priorities, which may be different, are privileged (Wilkins, 2019a).

The NPM and rational self-management technologies secure, Hartley (2018) assures, a performativity logic focusing on managerialism and professional, corporate and market accountability. Evidentially, the City Academy LGB effectively performs monitoring, audit, and evaluation, focusing on targets and goals, production of action plans, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and maximising outputs, in line with the primary objective of corporate citizenship, with social impact being secondary concerns (Johnson et al., 2017). As the Chair of Governors stated:

I don't think a governing body can truly own governance and governing if it doesn't co-create the vision and the school improvement plan. They would have no sense of ownership of it. Firstly, fundamentally, our job is to support and challenge and if we do not do that with rigour ... then is no point in us doing it.

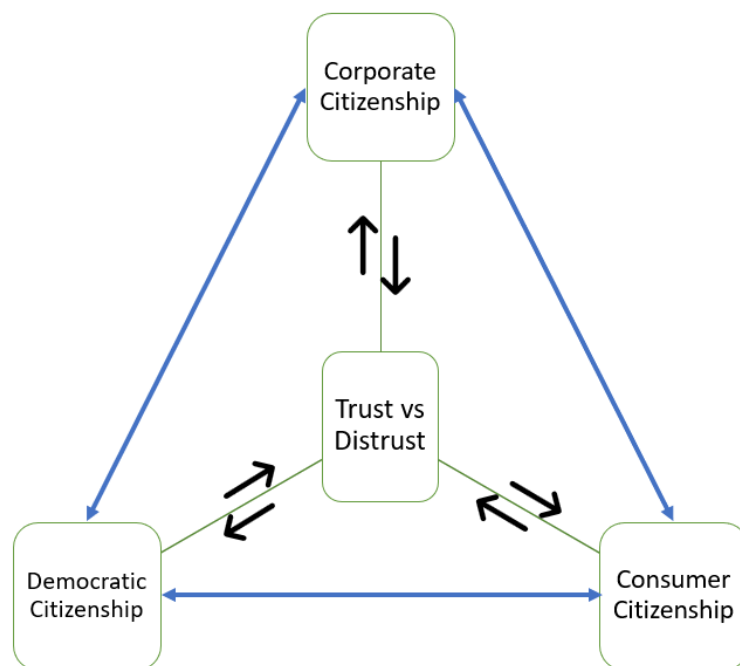
The Chair of Governors recognises and strives for 'good governance' as a process and outcome, in the instrumental-rational formulation of governance (Wilkins and Gobby, 2021) which is the embodiment of NPM practices, and 'good governance' in which the organisation is governable, answerable, and transparent (Wilkins and Gobby, 2021). The Chair's leadership practices indicate her demand that the organisation is governable and answerable. She ensures the governing body: has 'teeth' and can 'challenge'; owns the Academy Improvement Plan and associated KPIs; and drives the direction of the organisation through the visioning days (days dedicated to developing the vision and associated improvement plan) and day-to-day leadership of the LGB. Furthermore, this operationalising enables the external scrutiny of the LGB to be made amenable (Wilkins, 2019a), and comparable to others utilising the same standards, reducing risk and promoting brand advantage, if perceived to be good.

However, as outlined above, democracy, a key value of the co-operative movement, and one which is embedded into the Articles of Association, is at odds with rational self-management technologies. The instrumental-rational formulation of governance, as Wilkins and Gobby (2021) suggest, is a globally recognised model of good practice and construed as apolitical, has been constructed in a neoliberal political logic. A logic that the Chair and leadership of the CAT and City Academy have been so inculcated, through governmentality techniques, which when rewards for success are great, the discourse so strong and stakes so high, would defy a deviation from. This inculcation of image and practices of leadership equate to the sets of interests of a neoliberal political rationalisation of behaviours, or the neoliberal normative order of reason (Lingard and Hursh, 2019; Kulz, 2021). The privileging of the neoliberal logic over the parent stakeholder is significant in the domination of the agnostic-political formulation (Wilkins and Gobby, 2021) which requires the LGB to conform to government expectation of good governance over local deviations, which ultimately compromises co-operative values for market accountabilities. Kulz (2021) underlines the exclusionary impact of neoliberal rationalities, by valorising the lack of democratic participation, through white middle-classness and the valued professional, as well as technologies to extend the market value. Also, Kulz (2021) states that a perceived failure of neoliberal rationality would be to reverse exclusionary practices, not the converse.

Conceptualising the interdependence of corporate, consumer and democratic citizenship

What has emerged from this research is that those agents in the polity of the CAT LGB are positioning or positioned in coexisting interdependent citizenries, which, by the nature of that positioning, determines the extent or limitations of agency and citizenship in relation to the rights, duties, and contribution to the common good in that specific citizenry. Furthermore, that trust and distrust are active determinants of positioning, determined in relation to whichever citizenry is dominant. In relation to CAT LGB polity the corporate citizenry is dominant and therefore, through the active determinants of trust and distrust, positions parents and community members as consumer citizens; limited contributors to the consumer satisfaction process, providers of data to promulgate fabrications of brand and competitive advantage. Unless parents are elected through the illusion of a

formal democratic process, they are positioned in the corporate citizenry, driving the goal of brand and competitive advantage and securing risk mitigation strategies. Parents who wish to evoke their democratic citizenship as members of the public sphere, to engage in dialogue, to deliberate in the common interest are distrusted. Therefore, whilst positioning themselves in the democratic citizenry they are constrained by those in the corporate citizenry to exert their rights without corporate response. Figure 1 conceptualises the interdependence of the three citizenries and their relationship with trust. It is important to note the contestation surrounding 'consumer citizenship' as binary concepts, however, in this study, it is accepted as a messy assemblage of contradictions and motivations, which conflate justifiably (Clarke et al., 2007; Wilkins, 2010; Kallhof, 2013).



Conclusion

As suggested above, by allowing more freedom from centralisation, the economic and political goals of governments, which are interwoven with public perception of the success of the decentralisation of education, are vulnerable to risk (Wilkins and Gobby, 2022). To mitigate this risk, governments, and other regulators or government proxies, adopt 'hard regulation', a rationality and framework of government. In turn, this reimagines and responsabilises the actors in the edu-business-scape, as risk managers and risk mitigators, constructing their own rationalities and frameworks of governance for achieving control and intervention.

The primary audience of brand reputation and advantage are government proxies; the RD and Ofsted with parents and stakeholders as secondary audiences. A further audience for brand failure and subject to risk mitigation strategies is the public perception associated with The Co-op brand itself. The representation of the Co-op Group brand is high profile in the public arena as an ethical, values-

led organisation, based on co-operative values and principles with a commitment to social justice and community regeneration (CAT, 2021). Hence, the CAT has complex objectives and is subject to significant risk to brand advantage and brand failure, as part of a 'branded' education system, which render pedagogical beliefs and values into marketable commodities (Simon, 2017). To mitigate risk, the CAT governance model forges forward with a localised approach to delivering brand objectives yet utilises brand and local expertise in the form of gatekeepers, boundary spanners (Ball and Junemann, 2012) and carefully selected 'trusted' parent governors to secure the effective technologies of rational self-management, which in turn secures brand protection and brand advantage. This places in tension the brand objectives, co-operative values, and the agnostic-political lens (Wilkins and Gobby, 2021) a neoliberal political dominance, through which the organisation delivers its objectives. Furthermore, the brand objectives, its organisation as an LGB, the illusion of democracy and the reimagining of the roles of those members of the LGB, cement upward accountability, with parents and community members secondary to the power and the need to be perceived by the RD as high status, in a hierarchicalised system of MATs. Thus, mitigating risk by control and power of 'trusted' individuals and practises which are deemed trustworthy by those who are determining the amenability of scrutiny.

Additionally, an important conceptual contribution to the field has been exposed from this research illuminating the complex interplay between three competing citizenries namely corporate, democratic and consumer, all of which co-exist interdependently in relation to the notion of trust. This conceptual frame exposes agentic positioning which underpins the managerial practices, which perfect control and intervention technologies needed to secure brand advantage.

Whilst focussing on a single case-study academy within one MAT, we acknowledge the inherent limitations in inferring broader claims. Nonetheless, our research importantly, has examined the effects of brand objectives, and brand advantage, on the school governance practices relating to risk mitigation strategies enacted and resultant democratic deficit. The conceptual framework developed fruitfully illuminates the potential positioning of citizens involved in school governance **and, therefore,** makes an important contribution to the field. Future research might usefully examine branding strategies, reputation oversight and management processes of more institutions within a MAT and/or comparatively between MATs.

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