
Co-operative Schools: building communities in the 21st century

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ABSTRACT The recent progress of 'co-operative schools' both confirms and disrupts many assumptions surrounding contemporary compulsory schooling. The term itself refers to an eclectic array of schools, both primary and secondary, of which there were, by June 2012, almost 300 in England that have adopted co-operative values, in terms of governance, pedagogy and curriculum, and come together as a movement. They have emerged from within a fissiparous ecology of education which has given rise to new schools and networks, including academy schools, converter academies, free schools, trust schools and specialised schools. In this article the author argues that these changes have all offered opportunities for co-operative alternatives to be established.

The emergence of 'co-operative schools' both confirms and disrupts many assumptions surrounding contemporary compulsory schooling. The term itself refers to an eclectic array of schools, both primary and secondary, that have subscribed to co-operative values and structures. By June 2012, almost 300 English schools had come together as a network. They have emerged from within a fissiparous ecology of education which has given rise to new schools, including academy schools, converter academies, free schools, trust schools and specialised schools. These changes have all offered opportunities for co-operative alternatives to be established.

Over recent decades, new policy initiatives have been pitted against the tenacious continuities in schooling, in terms of structures, curriculum and pedagogy as well as stubborn social inequalities. History furnishes many examples where reforms have proved inadequate to bring about desired changes but rather have generated unexpected consequences (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Ball, 2008). The idea and practices of co-operative schools reflect these tensions between past and present and reveal how the results of education policy cannot necessarily be predicted in advance. The apparently innovative nature of the co-operative experiment appears to have at least in part been grafted from values

and practices which have grown deep roots across the last two centuries (Cole, 1944; Gurney, 1996).

Co-operation in History

It is indeed possible to recognise ways in which co-operative schools have drawn upon historical themes. The history of the co-operative movement itself discloses a curious blend of prosaic institution-building alongside utopian democratic transformation in which education and learning played a significant role. From small beginnings in the early nineteenth century, consumer co-operation grew at a considerable rate so that, by the end of the century, approximately 1500 independent co-operative societies had spread across the country. Through their aggregated power, societies had also evolved banking, insurance, wholesaling, production and transport networks. This industrial power house was based upon a democratic foundation in which all members, the owners, were given one vote irrespective of their shareholding power. Such material strength engendered a confidence that other areas of life could be brought under a co-operative umbrella. Figures such as J.T.W. Mitchell, the head of the Co-operative Wholesale Society, exuded this assertiveness and argued that there was no form of social organisation which could not be reconfigured along co-operative lines:

We want to put the profits of trade into the pockets of the people ...
Co-operators want to use the best means to get the entire wealth of
this country, land and everything else, into the possession of the
entire body politic. (Yeo, 1995, pp. 49–50)

Mitchell believed wholeheartedly in this vision as both utopian and realistic; the movement itself had given rise to such deep democratic sensibilities.

From its inception, the co-operative movement also cultivated a range of educational provision. For example, from 1844, the first successful consumer society, the Rochdale Pioneers, championed libraries, reading rooms, laboratories and trips for members of the society. Later in the century, co-operatives helped to create the momentum behind university extension and working-class adult education that thrived within the Workers' Educational Association and elsewhere from the early 1900s. Co-operative 'educational' activities would flourish in the period prior to 1939 and included classes and examinations for members in co-operative, economic and social topics; vocational training for employees of an expanding business empire; the formation of a Co-operative College in 1919; a wide range of cultural and sporting activities such as choirs, dramatic societies, bands and athletics to name a few. The Women's Co-operative Guild represented a highly active and democratic campaigning organisation which extracted gains for working class women on issues such as health and maternity (Scott, 1998). International co-operative day was instituted in the early 1920s and became a focal point for the celebration of the power of co-operation, also echoed in many of the films that

were produced by and about the movement (Burton, 2005). For some members, these activities provided a route into the governance of their societies while for others they cemented loyalty to what had become, literally, a way of life, from cradle to grave. By 1939, the movement boasted a paper membership of over 8 million, which, although exaggerated, nevertheless signified that co-operation had become a widespread social force (Woodin, 2011).

The vibrant culture of co-operation was weakened by a number of challenges. Many of the activities of co-operative societies would be taken over by expanding local councils. As the educational work of co-operatives was transformed into public services, the specifically co-operative content would be gradually drained, with co-operative books discarded from libraries and courses (Gurney, 1996; Woodin, 2011). Being considered the 'third wing' of a Labour Movement, focused upon state action and 'common ownership', created anxieties for co-operators whose distinctive messages could become muffled. Co-operative ideas for the transformation of society were gradually restricted to the confines of consumerism and, even within this ambit, other bodies emerged to support consumers (Hilton, 2003). In educational terms, top-heavy structures could dampen rather than enable the early missionary spirit which had invigorated the movement. Active membership and participation also declined in a world of growing consumerism and commercial privatised entertainment. Capitalist business became fearful of the potential power of co-operation and actively worked to neuter the movement. Internally, co-operators would also fall short of their high ideals; for instance, in dealing with fierce commercial competition, the trend to amalgamate into stronger business units became increasingly pronounced but, in the process, the movement failed to build upon its strengths as a member-owned business. The gradual marginalisation of the co-op from public life was also visible in terms of the evolving welfare state, and co-operators were not always at the forefront of working out how co-operation might have played a greater role (see also essays in Yeo, 1988; Walton, 2009).

It was not until the late twentieth century that consumer co-operatives, spurred on by a number of events, began to respond actively to this deepening long-term decline. Competitors appeared to be stealing co-operative clothes with, for instance, companies such as Tesco introducing Clubcard, a watered-down version of the original co-operative dividend; Terry Leahy, who oversaw the Tesco revolution, had himself originally worked for the co-op. In addition, the demutualisation of building societies testified to a declining public recognition of mutuality, as 'savers' – members – willingly benefitted from the reserves built up by earlier generations in accepting one-off payments in return for allowing the transformation of their building societies into private banks. The attempts of carpetbaggers to repeat this process with co-operative societies were thwarted but the danger signs were clear to see (Wilson, 2009).

Despite the growing power and concentration of capitalist business in the late twentieth century, the contradictory forces of neo-liberalism also helped to stimulate contrary pressures. Wider global shifts were raising awareness of the

potential for co-operatives to play a greater role in social, economic and cultural life. The continual problematising of the state by all major political parties focused interest on the role of civil society, voluntary organisations and co-operative and mutual enterprises. In this context, the sleeping giant of the consumer co-operative movement awoke from its slumbers and began to stretch its sinews into wider society. A process of renewal had been jumpstarted in the mid-1990s with the re-codification of values and principles in a 'statement of co-operative identity' by the International Co-operative Alliance. This emphasised the key values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity, honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others (ICA, 1995). One significant principle outlined in the ICA statement was that of education. The very notion of mutuality has been closely allied to the idea of learning throughout history. As member-owned businesses, successful co-operatives have depended upon educated and active members. It is these values and principles to which co-operative schools have subscribed.

A growing recognition of co-operation has resulted from its economic role. For example, the turnover of the largest 300 co-operatives now equates roughly to the economic size of the Canadian economy while, in the UK, the Co-operative Group boasts a turnover from a family of businesses exceeding £14 billion. Kofi Annan, the former secretary general of the United Nations, estimated that the movement had aided more than half the world's population. The Co-operative Commission (2001) was indicative of these shifts in Britain, with its emphasis upon the interconnected notion of a 'successful, co-operative business'. The Commission also recognised the role that co-operative ideas, values and structures might play more broadly. In doing so, it responded to the fact that, from the early 1990s, under a banner of 'new mutualism', co-operative and mutual models had been developed in new areas including health, childcare, leisure, sport and even utilities. While these have not always been legally co-operatives, and many have been multi-stakeholder hybrid forms, they have drawn upon the stock of ideas which grew from within the movement historically (Leadbetter & Christie, 1999; Birchall, 2008). The current trend to co-operative schooling should be seen as a highly significant example of this process of 'mainstreaming'.

Education Policy

Growing interest in co-operative models of education has to be placed within the context of existing education policy and practice. In recent years, the broad constancy of direction has been a striking feature of education policy, with successive governments seemingly being encouraged to take one step further than their predecessors. Current changes are often dated back to the 1988 Education Act, which initiated a process of increasing independence, diversification and autonomy for some schools and greater choice for parents able to take advantage of the new situation. In part, the escalating pace of change has been motivated by the desire of policy makers to shake up what

were perceived as outdated practices and structures and make the education system more forward-looking and responsive to changing times. Spiralling policy initiatives and schemes have aimed to undermine the role of local education authorities and release entrepreneurialism capable of enhancing national competitiveness within a global marketplace. New forms of privatisation and marketisation have been introduced, ostensibly to improve business efficiency and learning but also at the expense of exacerbating inequalities. A simultaneous and contradictory trend has seen the honing of a more restrictive regulatory regime tied to much closer control and scrutiny of pedagogy and curriculum. The impulse to create an empowering framework for schools has had to compete with authoritarian impulses to control the process of schooling. This represents a significant reconfiguration of state education. The continuity of these trends is easily identifiable within the policies of the current Coalition Government. A restrictive approach to curriculum has been instituted, in the shape of the Ebac, alongside the ostensible freedom for all 'outstanding' schools, in the eyes of Ofsted, to become academies. Devolution has thus gone hand-in-hand with centralisation and close regulation (Ball, 2008; Chitty, 2009; Stephenson, 2011; Woods, 2011).

These developments have often been represented as a one-way street; a loss from which it is seemingly impossible to recover. Brian Simon wrote of the 1970s that it was 'downhill all the way' (Simon, 1991); if this was an accurate portrayal, the incline of descent must have now reached precipitously dangerous levels in comparison with the past. This commonly painted picture of decline, fuelled by a moral recoil at changes over the past 24 years, has tended to present the neo-liberal assault as an all-encompassing fog from which the education system cannot emerge. However, as the sharp distinctions between public and private have blurred, contrasting visions of education have grown.

Co-operative Schools

The movement of co-operative schools represents a significant area of growth (Yeo, 2010; Thorpe, 2011; Facer et al, 2012). In 2003, the Values and Principles Committee of the Co-operative Group agreed to sponsor a number of specialist schools spread across England. Other provision was made in Scotland and Wales where specialist schools did not exist. Business and enterprise colleges were established and rapidly formed a network for mutual support. This collection of schools acted as a seedbed from which a number of strands would sprout in the coming years. One impulse was to help secure the future of the movement through awareness-raising and involvement of co-operatives in schools. The curriculum relating to co-operation was limited and often found to be completely absent – how would young people realise the opportunities in terms of employment and business creation if they knew nothing about co-operation? As a result, the Co-operative Group's charitable arm funded a curriculum development project to produce materials based on the work of teams of teachers in varying subject areas, supported by the Co-operative

College. They scoured the international co-operative movement for ways of teaching co-operative values within the National Curriculum. For example, fair trade, which offers stable and fair prices to producers in developing countries, formed the basis for curriculum materials in a number of areas such as geography, citizenship and business. The historical legacy of the movement was mined for banners which connected to art and design projects. Projects have also produced materials for primary schools (see <http://www.school.coop>; Wilson & Taylor, 2003).

More controversially, a co-operative response has also been made to the academies programme, initially introduced by the Labour Government in 2000. A co-operative legal model for an academy was drawn up by the solicitors, Cobbetts, and the Co-operative Group currently sponsor three of them in Manchester, Stoke-on-Trent and Leeds where it has pursued an approach centring upon co-operative values. For any business, getting involved with schools carries opportunities and threats given that academies have been widely criticised for undermining local democracy and accountability. But a different argument was gaining ground among co-operators: by engaging with contemporary policy and practice, a co-operative alternative could be developed, albeit from within the confines of the existing context of education.

The expanding optimism helped to generate the ideas and confidence to engage with broader policy changes in compulsory education. A turning point came with the 2006 Education and Inspections Act which enabled the formation of trusts whereby a number of schools could collaborate and establish a charitable trust. While they remained within the ambit of local authorities, the change allowed schools to take ownership of land and buildings, employ staff directly and to involve outside organisations in a structured way. In practice, the co-operative model emphasised the role of stakeholders in trusts: pupils, teachers, parents and community were all positioned as upholders of the values of the school. Rather than being led by an external lead body, in this case, schools themselves were beginning to form independent and autonomous networks and were using co-operative values as the vehicle for doing so. This initiative was warmly welcomed by the then Labour Government, and Ed Balls, secretary of state for education, agreed additional funding to help develop trusts and increase their number. This model of organising has, to date, witnessed the greatest growth in co-operative schools, with numbers currently around 200.

The active co-operative response to educational change has not abated under the Coalition Government since 2010. The introduction of converter academies and free schools by Michael Gove, the secretary of state for education, has been met with co-operative versions of these programmes. In fact, co-operative converter academies at first sight are more in tune with co-operative values and principles than trust schools given that, as far as governance is concerned, more direct lines of accountability are possible rather than having to establish a separate charitable trust. The 2011 legal document for establishing co-operative academies also emphasises an outward-looking approach based upon co-operative values:

the curriculum and ethos of the Academy will place an emphasis on, and include a commitment to students learning about, the Values with the aim of encouraging all students to become better citizens, not only while they are students but during the rest of their lives ... The Academy Trust shall be a member of the Schools Co-operative Society and commits itself ... to conduct its affairs in a manner consistent with the Values. (see DfE/Cobbetts, 2011)

A co-operative model for a free school has proved less successful. The vexed public debates over free schools reflected the fact that they have generally been set up in opposition to existing schools, often by groups of parents. Although small, as a flagship government scheme, it has exacerbated tensions within an already divisive system. While the theory of small groups of parents establishing schools based on particular values would at first sight seem to be in sympathy with the co-operative ethic, in reality they have found it hard to locate themselves within a co-operative setting. A number of exceptions exist. One co-operative free school, in partnership with Human Scale Education, is due to open in Swanage where school closures would have left the town without any secondary schools (Co-operative College, 2011).

Shades of Co-operation

These developments reveal how co-operation and co-operative values have strong affinities with education, a connection that has been exploited by schools for a range of reasons. Currently, different motivations can be identified among co-operative schools, from a core group which has used co-operation to improve education and participation, to one that is more loosely associated with the concept, perhaps seeing co-operation as means to defend existing ways of working. Visits to co-operative schools and attendance at school events have illustrated this first hand, and some examples are offered below.

The added value which co-operative values and principles bring to these schools is a debatable issue. The Co-operative College has suggested that a definition of co-operative schools should be based upon a co-operative approach to governance, curriculum, ethos and pedagogy. This aspirational classification of co-operative schools is forward-looking and outlines the path along which it is hoped schools will travel. In this vein, a 'co-operative mark' is currently being trialled which will encourage schools to apply co-operative values and principles across the full range of their activities. Legal documents allow co-operative schools to recognise teachers, pupils, parents, community and alumni as member constituencies; empowering these groups will clearly be a protracted process.

Social change in education is a slow process, especially in situations where autonomous partners value their independence. Initial encounters stimulated prolonged debates. The co-operative message and form of organisation is complex and can take time to understand. Co-operative values and principles

are wide ranging and open to varying interpretations. The co-operative movement, with an intricate internal structure which is over 160 years old, remains opaque to many observers. Not all schools have initially been clear that they are not joining an existing chain or brand but are being invited and supported to form their own autonomous organisation. Misunderstandings have even arisen when some trusts and converter academies hoped they might become eligible for funding from Co-operative Societies.

Complexity and contradiction also make the task of bringing about change within a school extremely difficult. The seemingly close association between co-operation and the values of many schools can give the impression that little has changed. For some Catholic schools, co-operative values appeared to quietly meld with their existing values and, according to one head, co-operation was the Catholic Church's 'best kept secret'. Becoming a co-operative business and enterprise college could initially be influenced by the desire to lever additional funding, as might have been done from any other private body. At times, trust schools have also been seen as the 'least worse option', a pressure which has become acute with the current policy of fostering academies in which schools fear being taken over by 'sharks', the 'predatory chains' which have stripped away the autonomy of individual schools and imposed a set of performativity based targets.

At the other extreme, some schools adopted co-operation wholeheartedly as a driver for school improvement, such as the Sir Thomas Boughey school in Stoke-on-Trent. The previous head, Dave Boston, inspired by the potential offered by co-operation, infused the whole school with co-operative values. This was most obvious in the curriculum, from business studies to English and drama, school visits and the organisation of partnerships with co-operatives nationally and internationally which resulted in new educational experiences. The results were impressive, not only in terms of government benchmarks, as the number of GCSE A-Cs rose from 46% in 2004 to 81% in 2009, but also in terms of the energy and enthusiasm that was sparked off. Whether such a tight co-operative embrace can enhance results in all cases is an issue that would clearly need further research.

The use of co-operation in schools has also begun in different places and schools have built on existing strengths and interests. Lipson Community College in Plymouth has pioneered the introduction of overlapping forms of co-operative pedagogy which pervade classroom teaching; vertical tutor groups in which pupils of different ages are mixed according to their interests; and the formation of mini co-operative businesses based upon school bands, catering, and selling pens and other supplies to pupils. Barometer groups offer pupils a say in the curriculum and parental involvement groups have begun to do a similar thing with adults, going beyond the limitations of a PTA. This is enhanced by an active culture of staff research, training and improvement through which new ideas are constantly developed and tested out. From a grounding in co-operative learning, whole school approaches to change have been developed.

Elsewhere, co-operative trusts appear to have the potential to become emergent educational systems, for which there is a widely recognised need (Pring et al, 2009; Hargreaves, 2010; Woodin et al, 2010). It is increasingly likely that co-operative schools will need to find multiple forms of support if they are to take control of their future. For instance, the Brigshaw Co-operative Trust on the edge of Leeds represents a strong example of partnership working across the 0–19 range, including secondary schools, primary schools and providers of early years and 14–19 education. As well as using cluster funding to create integrated services, the schools ‘top-slice’ their budgets to develop shared school improvement priorities and ensure the effectiveness of their procurement. A series of extended welfare services has been located within the partnership so that they become personalised to particular needs. A membership scheme has been offered across the network and a members’ forum has enabled them to identify new ideas and services. Generating and involving members is a key element of co-operative philosophy. Although it takes considerable time and work to achieve, in the long run membership promises to multiply the potential spaces for democratic discussion and participation in schools.

Moreover, as in many co-operative trusts, as well as academies, the impulse to break away from local education authorities and ‘go it alone’ has been muted or absent. In co-operative academies, local authorities have not simply been shunned but have continued to play a role in partnerships and governance arrangements which goes against the intention behind the academy programme. On a broader front, many councils have re-branded themselves ‘co-operative councils’, including Oldham, Lambeth and Newcastle, which have actively pursued co-operative local services.

However, the ongoing decline of LEAs and the current trend to ‘nationalisation’ (Newsam, 2011) and centralisation has intensified the need for new forms of collaboration. In Cornwall, co-operative schools have taken off to such an extent that swathes of schools are now co-operating with one another, building new umbrella bodies and so prefiguring more democratic examples of partnership. Over 100 schools in the country had or had expressed interest or already formed collaborative trusts by March 2012. One head teacher was clear that mutual models of education represented a means of defending public education:

How dare anybody give our schools away to a small group of unelected self-appointed individuals? I am concerned about apparent attempts to privatise or marketise education. What we are doing first in Cornwall and now more widely across the South West is the opposite of privatisation – it is mutualisation, ensuring our communities own their schools and have an effective say in their running. (McGovern, 2012)

In addition, wider networks have continued to form among co-operative schools, most significantly with a Society of Co-operative Schools (SCS) which grew out of increasing levels of informal association. The Society is to act as a

voice for co-operative schools whilst also offering services for members. One early action of the Society was to sign an agreement with UNISON that member schools of the SCS would adhere to national pay agreements, thus helping to alleviate trade union concerns about the conditions of their members. It also represented a softening of attitudes among trade unionists, an incremental process that looks set to continue. The tension between social movement and service delivery, common to most voluntary and co-operative organisations, has been clear in the early days of the Society. For example, some members are wary of attending meetings away from their schools for uncertain benefits. Yet those involved in the Society have had to balance the provision of services against responding to member concerns while not being viewed as over-directional. In addition, regional networks and conferences have been held in a number of areas helping to strengthen mutual relations in 2012. As a coherent force, co-operative schools could represent an equivalent to existing associations of church schools. With the great rise in the numbers of schools, proponents have begun to think in terms of a sector, a more systematic approach to embedding co-operation, which will be needed if these new models are to defend their unique ways of working (Woodin et al, 2010).

Conclusion

Multiple approaches have been adopted by co-operative schools and, given that it is nascent development, the future shape and longevity of this movement are hard to determine even though there are strong signs that it is growing firm roots. Co-operation is flexible enough to prove attractive to a wide range of schools but also provides a mode of progression into deeper levels of commitment and engagement. Many within the movement realise the long time scales involved and argue that the full effects of this change may not be felt for a generation until young people, educated in co-operative schools, return to their communities as adults and parents.

Co-operative schools have challenged current trends in educational policy. They work from within the existing framework but offer new directions. Indeed, the cement which holds together this range of schools has been some level of commitment to co-operative values and principles. The legal models for these schools have laid emphasis upon the involvement of key stakeholders of pupils, teachers and parents in addition to the wider community. Although legal documents are very much a starting point, they have provided a basis for more democratic versions of schooling. The claim for a 'co-operative difference' in education would appear justified, although the capacity of the education system to dilute change must also be recognised. While no guarantees come with the adoption of labels such as 'co-operative' and 'democratic', they do stimulate a dialogue over their meaning and ensure that schools remain answerable to wider constituencies that have the opportunity to challenge and debate.

In analysing these schools, it is important to retain a sense of critical distance. As readers of *FORUM* will be all too aware, the trajectory of

progressive educational change has rarely been a linear path but rather one beset with snags, dilemmas and contradictions. Of course, if growth continues we should expect strong opposition to emerge from within existing interests. As the role of local education authorities has been undermined, those elements of the historic labour movement which were to some extent hidden under the blanket of the state in the past, have emerged to play a greater role in society. It has been revealing to watch increasing numbers of people being won over to the radical potential inherent in co-operative approaches. But it remains to be seen whether democratic futures can be constructed from within existing restraints.

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